An activity theory analysis of how management of a private higher education institution interpret and engage with re-accreditation

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 6 April 2021

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to provide an in-depth understanding of how a single private provider conducted an application for re-accreditation in line with the recently revised accreditation framework set out by the Council on Higher Education. This framework aims to promote an integrated approach to accreditation and increased autonomy for higher education institutions with regard to the re-accreditation of programmes. The research unpacked how accreditation was understood and applied within the context of the institution, placing emphasis on understanding the elements that promoted or inhibited quality as well as the tensions and contradictions that arose within this process.

The driving question addressed by this research was: How does management within a South African private higher education institution engage with the re-accreditation process?

Literature revealed that there is limited research on understanding quality assurance in private higher education in South Africa, and specifically on accreditation.

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) was considered the most effective lens to interpret the findings of this study, as research indicates that it is for teasing out the historical and cultural contradictions within as well as between people, tools and the environment within complex educational systems. Multiple data-gathering techniques, including semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observations and documentation reviews, were conducted.

The findings of this study illuminate the critical role of management and their respective interpretations of quality in the shaping of the application for re-accreditation, that balanced quality development and accountability requirements. The study highlighted contradictions and issues that inhibited meaningful engagement with accreditation as well as the enhancement of programme and institutional quality.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education Policy; Internal Quality Assurance; External Quality Assurance; Private Higher Education; Accreditation; Development; Accountability; Cultural Historical Activity Theory; Illuminative Evaluation.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AS	Activity System
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CHAT	Cultural-Historical Activity Theory
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EQA	External Quality Assurance
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
IQMS	Internal Quality Management System
PHEI	Private Higher Education Institution
QA	Quality Assurance
QMS	Quality Management System

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 CONTEXT

1.1.1 PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The increased demand for accessible higher education by a diverse market has grown dramatically since the mid-1990s, due in part to internationalisation and the rise of the knowledge economy (Rumbley, Altbach & Reisberg, 2012). This trend in the massification of education has been coupled with limited management and financial capacity to meet this growth across increasingly diversified academic offerings. These are set within a differentiated sector that includes publicly funded institutions, private higher education institutions (PHEIs), and distance and online learning options (World Bank, 2002; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organisation, 1995).

In addition to the challenges facing higher education worldwide, the South African field – more than two decades since the dawn of the new democratic era – is still attempting to recover from the effects of the apartheid regime; as such, it is tasked with addressing national imperatives of "inequality, poverty and the need for economic growth" (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2016:vii) by creating equitable access to a transformed higher education sector. These objectives were articulated in the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997), and ambitious targets were set in the National Development Plan 2030. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013) echoed the need for an expanded education sector that addressed social inequalities and set out objectives for the improvement of quality in a single coordinated post-school system that is responsive to all relevant stakeholders.

The size and shape of higher education in South Africa has changed considerably in response to these objectives; in particular, there has been substantial growth in the private sector (Mabizela, 2006). However, this expansion was met with major public concerns regarding the quality of education that was offered, particularly with regard to international providers and distance education (CHE, 2009). The provision of private higher education was perceived to be of dubious quality, monopolised by unscrupulous providers who were in the field solely for financial gain and were considered a threat to the public institutions (Department of Education, 1997; CHE, 2003; Levy, 2003). These concerns set in motion a series of policy developments that were implemented

during the first decade of the new democratic era in order to: 1) regulate the provision of private higher education, 2) ensure accountability, and 3) protect the public.

It was only very recently that both the DHET (2013) and the CHE (2016) recognised the essential contributions of private providers to skills development in the country, suggesting that this is largely due to increased monitoring and regulation of the sector, which resulted in elimination of the poor-quality providers and enhancement of those committed to higher education. However, the DHET (2013) maintains that there are still inconsistencies and challenges within a diversified field, which cannot be ignored.

While the contribution of private provision is acknowledged, the DHET (2013) argues that public resources must be allocated to public institutions in order to support the majority of students. The lack of access to public funding by PHEI's, has a negative impact on their ability to provide increased and equitable access to higher education. Stander and Herman (2017) argue that in addition to funding challenges, which result in financial constraints, several other issues inhibit the efficient and effective delivery of private higher education. Firstly, PHEIs are required to navigate complex and lengthy registration and accreditation processes (DHET, 2013; Baumgardt, 2013) that are not always suited to the private higher education context (Ellis & Steyn, 2014), which has resulted in mistrust of the system and a sense of victimisation (Stander & Herman 2017); secondly, policies and procedures on internal quality assurance (IQA) adopted by many PHEIs are poorly conceived and inadequately implemented due to limited management capacity (Stander & Herman, 2017; Cele, 2005; CHE, 2016); thirdly, there is insufficient access to physical resources, including suitable library materials (Stander & Herman, 2017); and lastly, although many academic staff have extensive industry experience and are subject matter experts, they lack a theoretical understanding of pedagogy and the capacity to plan and conduct internal monitoring and quality assurance (QA), particularly within smaller niche providers (Stander & Herman, 2017). These issues and challenges exist despite the development and implementation of external quality assurance (EQA) legislation and regulations specifically to ensure and promote quality education.

1.1.2 Re-accreditation Pilot Study

In 2017 the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) proposed that the 2018 re-accreditation cycle be used as a pilot study to test the new accreditation framework. The candidates for this process were made up of PHEIs in their second or third cycle of re-accreditation. The candidates

were required to conduct and report on an internal programme review using the re-accreditation template and Criteria for Programme Accreditation (CHE, 2004). The re-accreditation template (refer to Appendix c: Introduction to the 2018 re-accreditation submission template) was redesigned taking the aims of the new framework into consideration, and was structured into eight key areas that addressed programme process and impact. It called for institutions to interrogate statements within each area and to justify and provide evidence to support their rating for each statement.

I am the Quality Manager and Director of a PHEI that was a candidate in this pilot study, entering its second cycle of re-accreditation, in which we were required to submit a successful application for re-accreditation in order to continue to offer an accredited programme. The outcome of the application was positive, and the registration of the programme was extended for a further six years, at which point another application for re-accreditation will be completed.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Private higher education is being recognised more and more as a valuable contributor to the higher education landscape, both internationally (Levy, 2018) and in South Africa (DHET, 2013; CHE, 2016; Bitzer, 2009). However, the literature reveals that minimal research has been undertaken to understand the quality of private higher education provision and, more specifically, how private providers understand and manage IQA when engaging with EQA within the current national regulatory context (Stander & Herman, 2017; Baumgardt & Lecketho, 2013; Ellis & Steyn, 2014). In a review of higher education (CHE, 2016) there is limited mention of PHEIs, with the exception of a chapter on the regulation of private providers. This touched on the size and shape of the sector, the events that improved and inhibited public confidence in PHEIs, as well as acknowledging that lack of involvement of PHEIs in the development of initial QA processes may have resulted in misinterpretation of the accreditation policies, processes and criteria, and the lack of strategic direction on the part of the DHET to promote the growth of much needed private higher education provision. In the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) there is also limited mention of private provision. However, the DHET did express the need to conduct a review of the regulation and QA of private providers, and identified the lack of capacity to ensure accountability of private providers. The White Paper also highlighted the complexity of the QA system for private providers.

The Criteria for Programme Accreditation were published almost 15 years ago (HEQC, 2004), yet only two studies have been conducted within this period to investigate programme accreditation. The first addresses the challenges associated with the peer review processes adopted by the CHE (Cross & Naidoo, 2011), and the second identifies the associated barriers and challenges experienced by management in private higher education in South Africa (Stander, 2016). While the impact of current legislation on the management of quality in private higher education has been briefly touched on by Rumbley, Altbach and Reisberg, (2012), the DHET (2013), the CHE (2016) and by Dr Essack at a recent CHE workshop, it has been addressed in more detail in two separate studies by Ellis (2012) and Baumgardt (2013). Although slightly dated, it is worthwhile to note Cele's (2005) contribution to understanding the state of quality in PHEIs, as this presents a historical perspective of the challenges experienced by private providers in relation to EQA and accreditation demands.

In addition to the need for qualitative research conducted by private providers, several national reviews and publications recommend that accurate and comprehensive data need to be collected on the private sector in order to improve national planning and fully utilise the contribution of PHEIs towards skills development (CHE, 2009, 2016), and to understand the contribution and "the extent and quality of private educational provision" (DHET, 2013:15).

More specific recommendations regarding further research in private higher education point to conducting studies on QA management, programme accreditation and quality in PHEIs, together with more quantitative studies within this area (Stander, 2016). Ellis (2012) recommended in-depth studies on the impact of the current regulatory framework on management teams within the private higher education sector. Baumgardt (2013) suggested that the focus of further research should rather be placed on the impact of accreditation and QA on improvements in teaching and learning, as well as on conducting comparative studies of QA practices for private providers in other African countries.

Taking the notable gaps in the literature mentioned above, together with the recent recommendations for further research on QA in private higher education into consideration, the focus of this study is well placed to contribute to this body of knowledge, which is clearly lacking in many respects, particularly from the perspective of the private provider.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.3.1 CENTRAL QUESTION

The central question that will be addressed by this study is: How does management within a South African PHEI engage with the re-accreditation process?

1.3.2 GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following three guiding questions will shape the study:

1. How does management understand re-accreditation?
2. What tensions and contradictions arise within the re-accreditation process?
3. What elements of the re-accreditation processes promote or inhibit quality development?

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are complex environments that are impacted directly and indirectly by various stakeholders in the shared goal of increasing access to quality education for economic development and social transformation. They are made up of multiple, intersecting systems, differences in power between stakeholders, implicit and explicit norms and standards, and shape and are shaped by their history and context. In order to gain an improved and holistic understanding of the experiences of management within a PHEI, specifically with regard to their interpretation of and engagement in accreditation, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2000) was considered the most appropriate theoretical lens. CHAT provides an effective theoretical framework for interpreting complex education environments, where the focus is placed on understanding the participants' experiences within an activity system (AS) – the primary unit of analysis – with a shared object (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). This theory proposes that learning is culturally and socially situated and is stimulated by contradictions and tensions within and between complex systems (Roth & Lee, 2007).

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Situated within the qualitative paradigm I adopted an illuminative evaluation approach to the study. This lens focuses on gathering information which is rich, detailed and context-specific, and allows for the emergence of themes and perceptions of quality and how they are applied within the context of the re-accreditation process. It supports the aim of the study to understand how and why

the managers have particular views and take relevant actions; while not attempting to explain or predict. Thus, illuminative evaluation supports the conceptual framework in attempting to gain an in-depth understanding of a complex, layered and sometimes contradictory environment. I selected my place of work for the study, as personal insight into the history and culture of an organisation is hugely beneficial (Flick, 2018) to a case study. I used multiple data-gathering techniques, inclusive of semi-structured in-depth interviews with management; participant observations during the re-accreditation process; and the review of relevant documentation, in an attempt to illuminate the contradictions and tensions within the re-accreditation process. The interviews and observations focused on surfacing the managers' perceptions about quality, QA and accreditation and their lived experience of the re-accreditation process. Chapter 3 outlines the research methods applied in this study.

1.6 RATIONALE

This study was motivated firstly by my own experience in higher education, grappling with the tensions that exist between internal and EQA and meeting accountability requirements while maintaining a focus on quality development. I observed that there were certain interventions, approaches and structures that promoted quality development, while others inhibited it or prioritised accountability requirements. I therefore wished to gain a deeper understanding of these challenges and opportunities and to use this to improve my practice. I wanted not only to understand what inhibited quality, but also what I could do as both researcher and director to influence the development of quality within the organisation together with management, academic staff and support staff.

From an academic perspective, this study was motivated by the need to contribute to the much-needed research on QA within PHEIs, specifically on accreditation.

1.7 SCOPE AND PURPOSE

The study does not attempt to present a broad understanding of how all PHEIs grapple with the tensions between IQA and EQA, and more specifically re-accreditation, but rather it focused on illuminating the nuanced complexities, challenges and opportunities that exist within a single institution.

Insights presented in this study may be useful to highlight possible issues that may arise when responding to accreditation requirements and in assisting the higher education community, in general, to better understand the QA issues that arise within a PHEI. The findings of this study could be used to

inform the design of institutional policy as well as to increase the validity, meaningfulness and impact of IQA within the institution. It also puts forward recommendations regarding interventions that may positively impact the quality of education offered by PHEIs in general, as well as on issues that the CHE may not previously have considered.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, three bodies of literature pertinent to this study are critically reviewed. Firstly, because the research question focuses on accreditation – a mechanism of QA – the key debates regarding quality and QA in higher education are presented, noting the challenges regarding a shared understanding of quality and QA and highlighting the need for surfacing the underlying power differentials and for developing an appropriate balance between accountability and development. Secondly, the three generations of CHAT are critically reviewed to provide a holistic understanding of the main concepts of this framework that were applied to the study. The characteristics, strengths and limitations of this theoretical framework are evaluated, arguing that this lens assists in framing the study and structuring interpretation of the findings to better understand the contradictions and tensions that exist within a complex learning environment. Lastly, illuminative evaluation is discussed, positioning it as a complementary research methodology to CHAT which encourages an iterative approach and is particularly useful for studies in education that aim to highlight the contradictions between what is intended and what plays out in the lived experiences of management.

2.2 QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION

2.2.1 QUALITY

> *'Quality, you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is … What the hell is quality? What is it?'* (Pirsig,1999:184)

It is necessary to attempt to clarify the definition of quality applied in this study, as it influences analysis of the findings. Elassy (2013:258) argues that 'it is important to have an understanding of what quality is because the way of improving will be determined by the definition'. The concept of quality in higher education has been highly contested since the mid-1990s and is no longer taken for granted. It means different things to different stakeholders and can be further shaped by the context within which the individual finds themselves. Thus, a stakeholder may interpret quality differently in different contexts. It

can be argued that the concept of quality should not be detached from purpose and context (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

Harvey and Green (1993) provide a workable definition of quality for the education context that continues to be applied today. They propose that the concept of quality can be grouped according to five broad, interrelated categories. Firstly, quality can be viewed as exceptional; this view is often elitist and does not provide definitions or measurements of quality, or proposes criteria of excellence which are virtually unattainable and are often judged by the reputation of the institution. Another aspect is the definition of high standards that are absolute, objective and static. Secondly, quality can be viewed as perfection or consistency where the focus is placed on the process and 'doing the right things well' and consistently conforming to predefined and measurable specifications which are benchmarked against external standards. Thirdly, quality can be viewed as fitness for purpose; it is a functional and inclusive view in which services or products are measured in terms of their ability to achieve what they are designed to achieve. Issues regarding who defines the purpose – the customer or the provider (mission), and how fitness is assessed and by whom – challenge this perspective. Fourthly, quality can be viewed as value for money, a populist view and based on the assumption that 'you get what you pay for' and that quality is linked to reputation or a brand. The focus is often on efficiency and effectiveness and justifies the need for accountability and control mechanisms, and adopts the use of performance indicators to monitor efficiency with a tendency to measure what is easily measurable. Lastly, quality can be viewed as transformative, which places emphasis on 'qualitative change', and the assumption that transformation is a dialectical process with a negotiated outcome and is therefore not unidirectional. It is not merely a service that is provided but rather a process which ideally enhances, adds value to, and empowers the participant(s). Cheng (2017) notes that value for money, fitness for purpose and transformation are the dominant categories, but Harvey's (2006a) refinement of the earlier categorisation emphasizes that transformation is at the heart of QA.

In addition to these five categories, which are helpful to understand the main conceptions of quality, it is important to consider the influence that powerful stakeholders have on using interpretations of quality to their advantage. Beerkens (2015) warns that governments interpret quality in ways to prioritise their own agenda for higher education, with a focus on economic objectives rather than civic values and social mobility. These competing definitions are 'highly dependent on what the stakeholders see as a (potential) quality problem' (Beerkens, 2015:234) and thus tensions may arise when key decision makers interpret the goals of higher education and quality differently.

Harvey (2006b) states that 'Quality is the conceptual tool through which [quality assurance is] implemented'. It is important to understand the prevailing conceptions of quality within the context under study – which is challenging because at times these are ill formed or implicit – because they are not apolitical and shape what is valued, what is prioritised, and the decisions that are made regarding QA.

2.2.2 Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is underpinned by the concept of quality and varies in scope and purpose (Ryan, 2015). It is often poorly defined (Williams & Harvey, 2015; Blackmur, 2010) and is characterised by the use of terminology with multiple interpretations, that frequently results in misunderstandings (Vettori, 2018). Harvey (2006b) states that QA is the methodology applied to implement quality for the purposes of compliance, control, accountability and/ or improvement. However, many other researchers do not address the scope of QA; some suggest that QA includes quality enhancement within its scope (Raban, 2007), while others argue that these are two opposing concepts (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). According to the CHE (2017) "Quality Assurance" is understood as an overarching term which encapsulates different kinds of activities that span a continuum from quality control to quality enhancement, and which focus on either the institution or the programme level as the unit of analysis. The CHE developed the national EQA system based on the three conceptions of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993) – fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation – and argue that they are still current today (CHE, 2017). For the purposes of this study, the interpretation of QA defined by the CHE shall be applied, as it encompasses the various aspects of quality at both the institution and the programme level, and is thus useful within this context. It is notable that the terms 'quality assurance' and 'external quality assurance' are often used interchangeably in the literature; however, Luckett (2006) differentiates between EQA and IQA, and this will be adopted for this study.

The literature on QA generally focuses on external quality monitoring processes, particularly from the perspective of quality councils, or IQA aimed at quality improvement. Very few studies address questions regarding the relationship between IQA and EQA (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

The rise of EQA was a worldwide phenomenon in the mid-1990s and was motivated by the need to address several challenges facing higher education, including: massification of higher education, internationalisation of qualifications, mobility of students and staff, the rise of private education, and an increased focus on the need for accountability to state and society and for addressing national

imperatives (Strydom, Zulu & Murray, 2004). By 1998, when the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education was held, almost all nations had established or were in the processes of establishing national QA systems in higher education which varied dramatically in design and focus. However, by the early 2000s, due in part to the Bologna Declaration (European Ministers in charge of Higher Education, 1999), these systems, codes of practice and frameworks resembled each other more closely (Rumbley, Altbach & Reisberg, 2012; Harvey & Williams, 2010), with the aim of promoting mobility, transparency, and consistency. Concerns were raised by Harvey and Williams (2010) regarding the suitability of these generic systems for such a variety of contexts, noting in particular the adoption of western views for developing countries.

On the whole, EQA systems are coordinated by a national agency that is mandated to ensure and promote quality in higher education through the implementation of audits, accreditation processes, assessments or inspection, and external examination or national examination at programme and/or institutional level (Harvey, 2018). In some countries, some or all of these QA procedures are compulsory for public and/or private institutions, while in other countries institutions may choose to participate in a bid to improve competitiveness (Rumbley, Altbach & Reisberg, 2012).

The development of IQA systems is generally motivated by the need to respond to the requirements of the EQA agencies, the design of which originated from the commercial and industrial sectors (Harvey, 2018). Many authors argue that these models are limited in their effectiveness within education (Williams & Harvey, 2015) because of the multiple stakeholders within this sector and because student learning is neither a product nor a service (Vroeijensteijn, 2000, in Luckett, 2006) and argue that they fail to address fundamental issues of quality (Harvey, 1995, in Harvey & Williams 2010).

The literature reveals that there are two main functions of QA: for accountability and for development. QA that focuses on accountability is largely driven by government (Amaral, 2007). In contrast, QA for development places the focus on teaching and learning in universities (Williams & Harvey, 2015). Several authors (Harvey & Williams, 2010, Harvey, 2006a; Massy, Graham & Shor, 2007) argue that QA includes both accountability and improvement. Elassy (2013) and Dano and Stensaker (2007) propose that it does not need to be an either-or approach, but that QA should be made up of a balance of accountability and development, and warn that EQA with an accountability focus is unlikely to encourage improvement. Dano and Stensaker (2007) highlight that an EQA system can be either more developmental or more accountability oriented, depending on the approach that is adopted and the way it is conducted. In

contrast, Harvey and Williams (2010) suggest that improvement and accountability must be conceptually and practically distinct systems in order to avoid power imbalances.

The tension between accountability and development is ultimately about who or what QA serves (Singh, 2010; Morley, 2003). This tension is particularly relevant to the discussion around accreditation which has a high stakes outcome. Thus, in order to gain an illuminated understanding of QA and the role it plays in developing versus accounting for quality, it is essential that the often implicit power dynamics are surfaced and made explicit. Stensaker (2018) and Harvey (2004) caution that accreditation which has been legitimised without appropriate scrutiny is highly political:

> … there is an underlying but unspecified and unexamined set of taken-for-granteds that legitimate accreditation. Accreditation is neither neutral nor benign; it is not apolitical. Quite the contrary, the accreditation route is highly political and is fundamentally about a shift of power but a shift concealed behind a new public management ideology cloaked in consumerist demand and … conformity. (Harvey, 2004:207)

This leads one to question the true intentions of the proposed new integrated QA framework, in which the CHE (2017) positions re-accreditation towards the quality enhancement side of the quality control–quality enhancement continuum. As suggested by Dano and Stensaker (2007), the tool itself does not ensure the intended balance, and neither does a stated claim – it is made clearer through the process of conducting the accreditation whose interests are served and to what extent the outcome is focused on development versus accountability. It is important to consider that there is an innate tension within an EQA system that professes to focus on development and yet is legislated for mandatory accreditation. By its very nature, mandatory accreditation has at its basis a focus on accountability.

2.3 CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY (CHAT)

In this section I will outline CHAT and the activity system (AS), arguing that it is a useful lens to interrogate the tensions present in the QA system stipulated by the CHE and how these are interpreted and applied to the re-accreditation process within the context of the PHEI under study.

2.3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this study, CHAT was applied in order to better understand the contradictions and tensions that arose in the re-accreditation process. This multidisciplinary theoretical framework has its origins in the socio-historical branch of Soviet psychology, in the studies of human behaviour, and is valuable for researchers who wish to understand human activity within a social and collective context (Roth & Lee, 2007). CHAT has been applied to complex learning environments within a variety of disciplines (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamaki, 1999; Chaiklin, Hedegaard & Jensen, 1999; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), from exploring theoretical concepts (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Engeström, 1987; Kaptelinin, 2005; Nardi, 2005), and describing real-world learning situations to understanding development work research (Engeström, 1999, 2000), and designing human-computer interaction systems (Kuutti, 1995; Nardi 1996; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, Rambe, 2012).

CHAT is not intended to be a predictive tool, but is useful for the organisation of complex real-word data while providing a systemic understanding of contradictions and tensions through the use of a manageable unit of analysis, namely human activity within the setting of the social context (Roth & Lee, 2007). Yamagata-Lynch (2010) warns that selecting and defining an activity that is appropriate to study may present a challenge within any research adopting a CHAT methodology, and may take several attempts to refine.

2.3.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE CHAT APPLIED TO THIS STUDY

CHAT is underpinned by the view that **an individual's understanding of reality is subjective** and **is shaped by the social, cultural and natural environment**. The social and cultural environment has been established over time and is thus historically influenced, which makes the understanding of the context more challenging as influences that might not seem relevant to the current situation are nevertheless prevalent and need consideration. It also assumes that the individual may not have an explicit understanding of the reality that he or she is making sense of, and that many of the aspects that influence his or her sense-making are implicit. These include assumptions about how and why things work the way they do and the decisions and actions that the individual chooses to take, consciously or unconsciously.

Although individuals are believed to view their reality through the context within which they find themselves, promoters of CHAT argue that **the individual has the power to shape – consciously or unconsciously – the social, cultural and natural context through his or her actions.** Individuals can

respond to external stimuli, whether from a social other or the natural environment, in a way that aligns to their intended goal, thus transforming themselves, their social reality or their natural environment. **This response and interaction with reality is *mediated* through the use of tools, cultural artefacts or the social other:** "The human mind is mediated by a third element, that is, humans have access to the world only indirectly, or mediately, rather than directly, or immediately" (Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995:21).

When an individual consciously embarks on achieving an outcome or goal, whether independently or shared with a group who aim to achieve the same outcome, they do so indirectly. In other words, their attempts to achieve the goal are mediated by the social and historical context and the natural environment, inclusive of relevant tools. **This process of (goal-oriented) shaping of the context, through mediated action, by an individual and/or group is defined as the AS.** It is important to note that individual actions are different from purposeful activities. Actions may make up an activity but may also be random or routine, and without contextualising them within an activity that has a defined outcome or purpose they will have no meaning and cannot be used as a unit of analysis. In other words, an action does not make up an AS and the focus must remain on the purposeful activities to ensure a complete analysis (Kaptelinin, Nardi & Macaulay, 1999:31).

Critical to CHAT is the understanding that the **individual is viewed as an integral element of the AS and cannot be understood in isolation**. To understand the individual consciousness, sense-making and development, the individual must be analysed within the AS, as they will act uniquely when engaging in an activity. There will be no evidence of the subject-object relationship before or after the activity and thus it is futile to attempt to study this interaction as separate entities. As Kaptelinin, Nardi and Macaulay (1999:28) state: 'the human mind emerges, exists, and can only be understood within the context of human interaction with the world'. This theory argues that you cannot make inferences about the interaction between the individual and their environment after studying them separately, as the elements 'do not just manifest themselves in various circumstances; they truly exist only in activities, when being enacted (Kaptelinin, Nardi & Macaulay, 1999:31). Thus Nardi (1996:7) posits that 'Consciousness is situated within everyday activity in the real world – you are what you do.'

When attempting to understand the activity, the CHAT researcher will study the AS as a whole. This system is made up of the subject, which may be an individual or a group of individuals who share the same goal, which is defined as the object, together with the mediation elements which include natural tools and cultural artefacts as well as social aspects of the explicit and implicit rules that govern the

actions and the community, as well as the division of labour which determines actions that the individuals take to accomplish the goal or subject of the activity. **The elements that make up the AS are understood to exist in an ever-changing relationship to each other.** Although they have inherent properties, their characteristics change and only have meaning when viewed in relation to the other elements of the system.

The key challenge is in defining the individual properties without losing sight of the whole as well as describing relationships between the elements which form part of the continuously evolving AS. In order to understand the whole, the various aspects need to be addressed, yet it is important to remember that the whole is greater than merely the tally of the parts and the relationship between these parts. The AS itself has its own identity and unique characteristics, which transform and are transformed by the elements and relationships within it. These various elements within the AS may appear in contradiction to each other, for example, tensions between and/ or within historical and evolving rules and the tools, may impact on the subjects' ability to achieve the object. Where other theories argue that these create a dichotomy, CHAT suggests that the relationship between these opposing elements is what contributes to meaning making. Proponents of CHAT (e.g., Cole, 1988; Roth & Lee, 2007) argue that this addresses the troubling divide between individual and collective, material and mental, biography and history, and praxis and theory. For example, those who are concerned with studying the relationship between the inner consciousness of the individual and the actions played out in the natural world argue that the interplay between these two aspects is reciprocal and each shapes the other through some form of mediation. Thus, these two spaces, although very different in nature, are not viewed as dichotomous but rather are studied in terms of how the one shapes and is shaped by the other. These two spaces form two of the complex layers that are experienced within the AS and illustrate how the researcher has the opportunity to not only investigate the relationships between the various aspects of the AS, but also to zoom in on the different planes of the system (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). These planes of sociocultural analysis can be understood at the personal, interpersonal, or institutional levels, depending on the positioning of the selected activity.

CHAT is used to uncover contradictions and tensions within the AS, because these are the areas that give rise to growth, development and learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2011)**.** This development may occur unconsciously and organically, where an aspect of the system is forced to jostle with and then adapt to changes in another area, in order to remain aligned to the object of the activity. By exposing the tensions and contradictions and making them explicit, more informed, and decisive actions can be

taken to streamline the system and achieve the intended outcome more effectively. Another view is that the system can be consciously disrupted in order to address inherent and historically adopted characteristics, perspectives or tools that no longer serve the subject in achieving their object. Whether conscious or unconscious, intended, or unintended, it is believed that the actions that are taken result in a reciprocal change in both the subject and the object and the mediating elements, and thus 'activity is considered the key source of development of both the object and the subject' (Kaptelinin, Nardi & Macaulay, 1999:32).

In summary, CHAT argues that we can only understand human consciousness through the investigation of activities. It aims to transcend dichotomies and is thus useful for the organisation of complex real-world data while providing a systemic understanding of contradictions and tensions through the use of a manageable unit of analysis: human activity within the setting of the social context.

2.3.3 The Evolution of CHAT

'Cultural-historical activity theory' was coined as a term by Michael Cole (1996), but this was developed through the work of Leont'ev (1978) and Engeström (1987). Engeström (2001) distinguishes between three generations in the evolution of CHAT. Elaboration on these phases will help in understanding why the currently adopted concepts were developed and the issues and concerns they were responding to. Several key players were involved in the development of CHAT as we know it today, each influenced by the contexts within which they were conducting their research. Vygotsky is viewed as the founder of the first generation of activity theory, and was predominantly concerned with sign or semiotic mediated activity. Leont'ev within the Kharkov School of Psychology moved the body of work into what Engeström termed the second generation of CHAT. Leont'ev focused on developing the social aspect of the model. CHAT was only taken up by researchers in the West more recently. It was promoted and developed predominantly by Engeström and Cole, who became interested in the theory and completed extensive work to develop it into the activity theory that is prevalent today.

2.3.4 First-Generation Activity Theory

The focus of the first-generation activity theory model, 'a complex mediated act' developed by Vygostky (in Engeström, 2015:xiv), is on the relationship between the subject and the object which is mediated by cultural artifacts also referred to as tools, or a knowledgeable other. .. This model, depicted in Figure 1,

dramatically changed the way people approached the study of human behaviour: 'The individual could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; and the society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artefacts' (Engeström, 2015:xiv).

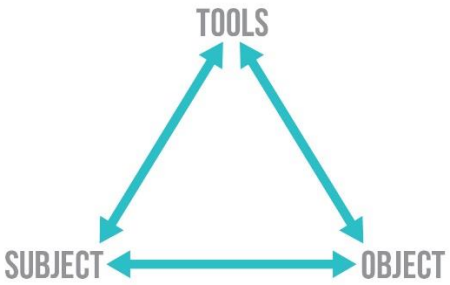

Figure 1: First-generation activity theory model (based on Vygotsky, 1978)

2.3.4.1 SUBJECT, TOOLS AND OBJECT

Within the mediated activity the subject can be defined as the individual participating in the activity: 'For Vygotsky the prime unit of analysis was that of culturally mediated action' (Sannino & Engeström, 2018). The subject is enabled to achieve the object through the use of tools or signs. Vygotsky (1978) differentiates between tools and signs, where signs are used to develop personally, and tools are applied when the aim is to achieve external mastery over nature. He further argues that the subject not only uses the tools or signs but is also shaped by them. Vygotsky (1978:132) posits that:

> The effect of tool use upon humans is fundamental not only because it has helped them relate more effectively to their external environment but also because tool use has had important effects upon internal and functional relationships within the human brain.

2.3.4.2 MEDIATED ACTION

Vygotsky (1978) did not align himself with the stimulus-response learning theorists, but believed that higher forms of learning would occur through the process of engaging with tools and signs to modify and respond to a situation in a series of indirect and mediated acts, where the subject chooses to control their behaviour to achieve the intended object. This complex process is what Vygotsky refers to as a mediated action; it results in a qualitative change and 'creates new forms of a culturally-based

psychological process' (Vygotsky, 1978:39-40). It is important to understand how the concept of mediated action remains integral to the later generations of activity theory.

2.3.5 Second-Generation Activity Theory

Leont'ev (1978) argued that Vygotsky's model was limited because it only focused on the individual. He developed the theory further by drawing attention to the distinction between individual action and collective activity, and how the individual action may appear meaningless without understanding of the greater collective activity. He shifted the primary unit of analysis from 'mediated action' to an activity that expanded the understanding of the mediated relationship between subject and object to include the social and cultural elements – rules, community and division of labour.

Engeström (1987) developed the graphic representation of this model (refer to Figure 2) and Ilyenkov (1977) highlighted that change and development within these systems was as a result of contradictions within the activity.

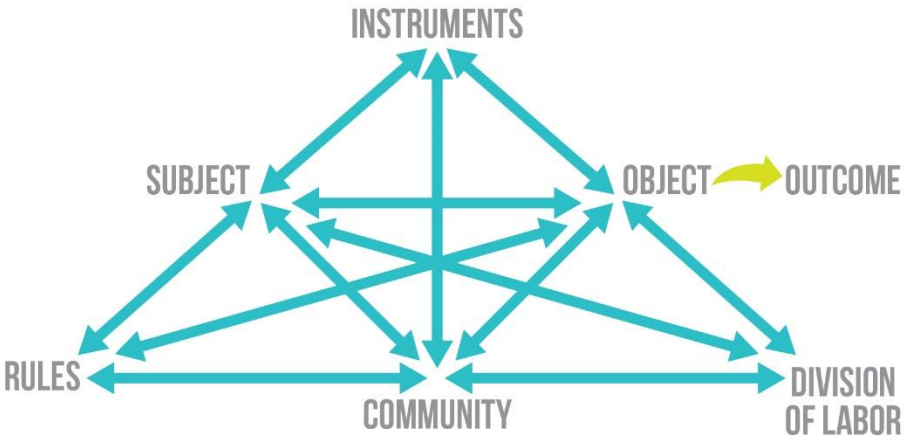

Figure 2: Second-generation activity theory model (adapted from Leont'ev, 1978:78)

2.3.6 Third-Generation Activity Theory

The third generation was developed by Engeström out of a need to address cultural diversity (Engeström, 2014) and was expanded to include a network of interacting activities, indicated in Figure 3.

It attempts to analyse the shared objects of more than one system as well as to investigate the more inner and personal aspects, such as subjectivity, identity and moral commitment.

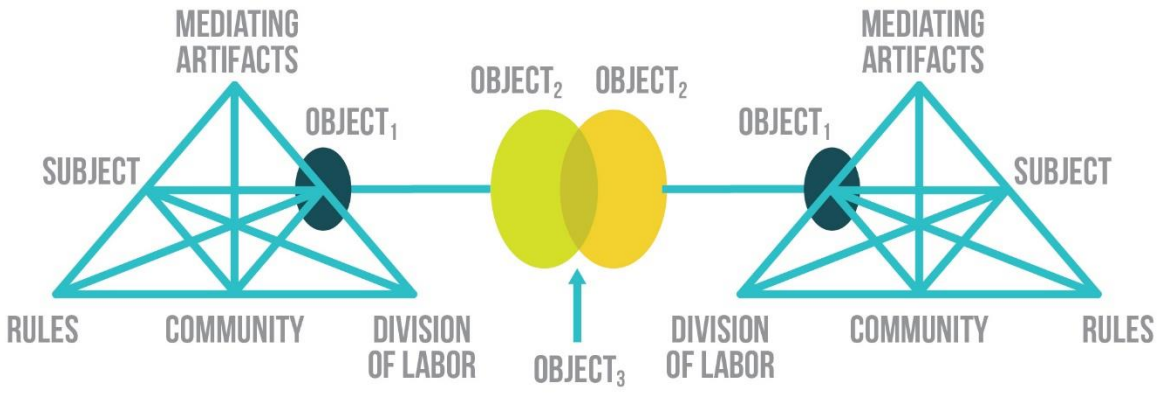

Figure 3: Third-generation activity theory model (Engeström, 2001:16)

2.4 ILLUMINATIVE EVALUATION

2.4.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the study was to provide an enhanced understanding of the application for re- accreditation carried out within a PHEI and the way in which management understood and engaged with this process. This environment is complex and required a theoretical lens that would effectively expose the subtleties of the situation: the tensions that existed between what is intended by the CHE and the reality of how this played out within a niche PHEI, and what is professed within the re-accreditation report and what is understood and acted out by management of the PHEI. For this reason, illuminative evaluation was selected as the research methodology for this study.

2.4.2 METHODOLOGY OF ILLUMINATIVE EVALUATION

Illuminative evaluation is a general research strategy that is concerned with 'description and interpretation rather than measurement and predication' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972:10). It reflects a phenomenological, ethnomethodological, or holistic approach to social science (Gordon, 1991) and was developed within and for the education context by Parlett and Hamilton (1972). These latter authors found the positivist approaches to evaluation common in the 1960s to be severely lacking for the needs

of education research. Illuminative evaluation was one of several attempts to develop an alternative approach, and for various reasons – possibly due to the readability of the text and the use of clear and relevant analogies and phrases – outshone the other models, including 'goal-free' evaluation (Scriven, 1972) and 'responsive evaluation' (Stake, 1978).

Illuminative evaluation is not defined by a set of methods but by the problem or issue that the researcher is attempting to analyse. Thus, it does not prescribe a set research design, but relies on the researcher to select the most appropriate research methods needed to illuminate an issue, and uses a quantitative and/or qualitative design to achieve this, taking the availability and quality of resources into consideration. The approach recognises that perceptions of reality are constructed and multi-faceted and uses 'triangulation' of data to shed light on an issue from multiple perspectives in order to identify inconsistencies as well as increase the validity of the study. Burden (2008:224) argues that 'The "illumination" is most likely to arise from exploring the perspectives of as wide a range of "stakeholders" as possible.'

The approach is characterised by three dialectical stages that inform and are informed by each other, with the aim of progressively focusing and distilling observations and interpretations: 'This "progressive focusing" permits unique and unpredicted phenomena to be given due weight' and allows for 'problem areas [to] become progressively clarified and re-defined' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972:20). In the first stage, *observation*, the focus is placed on becoming familiar with the lived reality of the general context and for teasing out the main issues and significant features, noting patterns in relationships between the individual and the organisation as well as beliefs and practices. As MacKay et al. (2008) state 'it is essential that considerable care is taken to negotiate exactly what sort of information all parties hope to gain from the evaluation process.' In the second stage, *further enquiry*, more selective and intensive attention is applied to selected themes, issues and trends which are identified and explored in a more directed and systematic way, with the aim of surfacing the nuanced tensions and contradictions of the environment. In the third stage, *seeking to explain*, an attempt is made to situate the individual findings within the broader context, for comparing interpretations that are surfaced through different lines of enquiry, and for identifying general patterns of cause and effect. The research design uses data collected through observations, interviews, questionnaires and tests, and documentary and background sources to create an information profile that is adapted throughout the study in response to the perspectives and needs – which are likely to change as a result of what is revealed during this iterative process.

Illuminative evaluation helps researchers to understand the most salient and often conflicting aspects of the environment, and is characterised by two important and distinct concepts that are pivotal to the analyses of the context: the 'instructional system' and the 'learning milieu'. The 'instructional system' is made up of the planned, stated or intended aspects of the educational environment. It is the shared understanding of how things should or are intended to occur. In the case of this study, the 'instructional system' can be viewed as the criteria for programme accreditation, the re-accreditation form and the workshop programmes and internal programme review plan. These original ideals are often in sharp contradiction when played out in reality in what Parlett and Hamilton (1972) term the 'learning milieu': the 'social-psychological and material environment in which students and teachers work together' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972:90). This constantly changing network of 'cultural, social, institutional, and psychological variables' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972:90) may lead to intended and unintended outcomes which shape and are shaped by the environment. The 'learning milieu' within this study, was the programme review and re-accreditation process that was conducted by the managers of the institution in response to EQA requirements.

The researcher studies both the instructional system and the learning milieu and pays particular attention to the analysis of the contradictions that arise between these two aspects. The intended objectives and the way that these should be achieved are identified and discussed during the analyses of the 'instructional system'. The way these objectives are understood and enacted within the learning milieu must be to carefully observed in order to gain insight into relationships and contradictions between what is intended and what in fact occurs, as well as 'important structures and interrelationships, negotiations between parties, reciprocal influences, alternative conceptualizations and value orientations, critical processes, resource utilization, and any other aspects of the environment deemed significant' (Gordon, 1991:371).

2.4.3 Limitations of Illuminative Evaluation

Proponents of traditional, positivist paradigms have objections regarding the subjective nature of illuminative evaluation and challenge it for its 'extensive use of open-ended techniques, progressive focusing and qualitative data' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972:96). However, Partlett and Hamilton argue that this is one of its key strengths. A second critique is that of the perceived limitation in scope of illuminative evaluations. This too was countered by Parlett and Hamilton (1972), who provided evidence of large-scale studies that adopted this approach. A third critique, offered by researchers who have used

illuminative evaluation, argue that the approach is highly time-consuming and labour-intensive, due in part to the vast amount of data that need to be collected, stored, and analysed (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Worthen & Sanders, 1987).

Taking these critiques into consideration, it can still be argued that Illuminative evaluation offers a useful approach to any study that requires flexibility and intends to reveal an improved understanding of what occurs in a specific context, in order to make informed and meaningful decisions regarding how to improve practice. However, illuminative evaluation does not offer specific criteria that could be used to analyse the design and implementation of the self-evaluation process. Although Parlett and Hamilton reject the use of models or frameworks, Burden (2008) argues that they can be useful in structuring the questions and interpretations without inhibiting the research process. Thus, CHAT was selected as a complementary framework in which to embed illuminative evaluation. The AS provided a useful model to expose the contradictions between various elements of this complex system.

2.5 CLOSING REMARKS

In this chapter, three bodies of literature were reviewed, covering quality and QA, CHAT and illuminative evaluation, arguing for their relevance to the study of a complex learning environment in which it was necessary to surface tensions and contradictions that are often culturally and historically embedded. Although separate areas of research, they provide a coherent and relevant theoretical backdrop to a qualitative case study within an educational setting. The research addressed questions related to the tensions that manifest within the interpretation and implementation of the re-accreditation process and thus I presented the significant debates regarding quality and QA which underpin accreditation, providing the various understandings of quality and highlighting key tensions and contradictions that characterise this field of study.

In order to adequately surface these contradictions in a meaningful and holistic manner that values the lived experiences of the participants, CHAT is positioned as a suitable learning systems theory that provides a systemic approach to interrogate the findings. Illuminative evaluation is posited as a complementary methodological approach that yields rich and detailed information and sheds light on the disparities between the 'instructional system' and the 'learning milieu', highlighting the most salient and often conflicting aspects of a study. By using the AS as a model to organise and process the data, the sense-making process is strengthened, without losing the richness of insights gained through adopting an illuminative evaluation approach.

CHAT and Illuminative evaluation are bodies of theory concerned with interpretation and surfacing nuances and contradictions within a complex social setting and are not intended for measurement and predication.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 OVERVIEW

The purpose of this study is to better understand how the management of a South African PHEI understood quality, QA and accreditation and engaged the process of applying for re-accreditation. Particular emphasis was placed on illuminating the tensions and contradictions that arose and the elements that promoted and constrained meaningful engagement and quality development.

In this chapter, I outline the rationale for the design of the study and argue for the suitability of the chosen methodologies and methods for addressing the purpose of the study. I first set out the research approach adopted, illustrating how the research methods, research methodology, theoretical framework and overarching paradigm are interconnected elements of the research which are each in turn informed by the other. I then discuss the data collection and interpretation methods used, noting the benefits and limitations in terms of addressing the research question. I conclude the chapter by addressing the ethical considerations and strategy adopted.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

In this section I provide an overview of the research approach that was adopted for this study. I argue that as a researcher undertaking a qualitative study, it is critical to make the overarching research paradigm and associated assumptions about knowledge explicit, as this influences selection of the theoretical framework, which in turn informs the research methodology, which subsequently determines the selection and use of the research methods (Crotty, 1998). In Figure 4 I present how I use and adapt Crotty's (1998) definition of the four interrelated elements of a qualitative study to inform the structure of the research approach:

- *Epistemology:* The theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology.
- *Theoretical perspective:* The philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.

- *Methodology*: The strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes.
- *Methods:* The techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypotheses. (Crotty, 1998:3)

Firstly, I discuss the overarching paradigm and the associated assumptions that inform my world view and my understanding of the nature, characteristics and value of knowledge as it relates to this study. Secondly, I argue that CHAT offers a suitable lens to make sense of the complex activity and illustrate how this framework is aligned with an interpretative paradigm. Thirdly, I highlight the concepts and approach that characterise illuminative evaluation and illustrate how these complement CHAT and help to inform the selection of appropriate research methods. Lastly, I discuss the data gathering and interpreting processes used, and how these are shaped by the epistemology, theoretical perspective and methodology applied to this study.

Figure 4: Overview of the research approach (adapted from Crotty, 1998)

3.2.1 Research Paradigm

This study is underpinned by an interpretivist *epistemology* which is more suitable for social research such as educational studies than the traditional natural scientific positivist and empiricist ideologies which prioritise researcher objectivity, and universal truths and are intolerant of difference. Usher (2001:18) posits that 'In social research, knowledge is concerned not with generalisation, prediction and control but with interpretation, meaning and illumination'.

3.2.2 Theoretical Framework: CHAT

In order to gain an improved and holistic understanding of the experiences of management within a PHEI, specifically with regard to their interpretations of the impact of EQA and IQA processes, CHAT (Engeström, 2000) was considered the most appropriate theoretical lens. CHAT is addressed in more detail in Chapter 2.

CHAT informed the research methods applied. The data collection process was guided by the key nodes of the AS, namely the subject, object, tools, community, rules, and division of labour, to design the interview schedules and points of departure for participant observations, in order to surface the multiple perspectives and influences at play within the setting. CHAT was also applied to the structuring of themes and illuminating of patterns during the process of data selection and analysis.

3.2.3 Methodology: Illuminative Evaluation

Methodology is the activity 'of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating, and justifying the methods you use' (Wellington, 2015:33). Illuminative evaluation was selected as the research methodology for this study. It is situated within the interpretive paradigm and more specifically within the anthropological or ethnographic approach (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). The benefit of this approach is that the information gathered is rich and detailed and provides a deeper insight into the complexities of the situation within its natural context. It is considered highly valuable for the researcher, as ethnographer, to be a member of the community which they are studying and to be closely familiar with the culture and complexities within the environment (Flick, 2018; Bassy 1999). It was therefore favourable that I conducted the study within my workplace and that I was deeply engaged in the issues and challenges that arise in this space.

The two central concepts to Illuminative evaluation – 'instructional system' and 'learning milieu', discussed in detail in Chapter 2 – were applied to the study. The 'instructional system' is defined by the

documentation related to the re-accreditation process and is inclusive of the completed application for re-accreditation form together with the internal as well as external guidelines, policies, procedures, legislation, rules, workshop presentations and communiques that regulate, specify and set out the intended re-accreditation process.

The research approach adopted for the study is designed on the assumption that 'an instructional system, when adopted, undergoes modifications that are rarely trivial' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972: 12). The methods adopted were structured within the three stages typical of illuminative evaluation (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972), namely: 1) observation; 2) further inquiry; and 3) explanation. Within each stage, issues and patterns were allowed to emerge and used to inform the design of the subsequent stage in order to progressively clarify and define emerging phenomena.

Throughout the three stages, multiple data-gathering techniques, inclusive of semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observations and documentation review, were applied. Emphasis was placed on triangulating information in order to curb bias, by gathering data from different sources so that various perspectives were taken into consideration with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Moran-Ellis (2006:47) defines triangulation as 'an epistemological claim concerning what more can be known about a phenomenon when the findings from data generated by two or more methods are brought together' and suggests that although triangulation may not promote the validity of measurement, it can expose the complexity of the varying perspectives and dimensions within the set context.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODS

In this section I explain the research methods and how they have been informed by the research methodology, theoretical framework and epistemology of the study. I first describe the role of the researcher and the details of the case study before outlining the data collection, processing, and interpretation methods. Lastly, I explain how the quality of the research was evaluated.

3.3.1 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

Researchers adopting an illuminative evaluation approach face several challenges in order to ensure that the study is valid, reliable and conducted ethically, with a view to exposing the multiplicity of perspectives and an increased understanding of the context in order to aid decision makers.

It is essential that researchers adopting this approach are critically aware of their values and personal agendas as well as the ethical role they play in the study. As with other qualitative research methodologies, illuminative evaluation understands that the researcher is not objective or un-biased (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). Therefore, the researcher must communicate their personal perspective and ideologies, while at the same time making every effort to shed light on the various opinions and viewpoints with integrity and fairness. Furthermore, it is understood that the perspective of the researcher may be transformed during the research process and as a result of the study, and it is important to be open to and to note these changes (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). Because these multiple perspectives are made explicit, decision makers and/or benefactors of the research are therefore able to interpret the findings according to their own needs. Although the approach does not stipulate that the researcher be internal or external to the context, they are expected to intervene in the sense that they aim to change the way in which the situation is understood (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972).

Researchers adopting this approach must be skilled in accurately and perceptively making sense of complex and often conflicting data from multiple sources, and transforming these into meaningful information. Thus, I kept a journal for the duration of the study in which I critically reflected on my interpretations and sense-making process. Illuminative evaluators tend to adopt a narrative style when reporting on findings and avoid taking a strong standpoint while promoting validity over reliability Parlett & Hamilton, 1972).

3.3.2 Description of the Case Study

A single case study was selected for this study in order to enable a deeper understanding of the complexities that characterise the responses to the accreditation processes conducted within a PHEI. Bassey (1999) argues that case studies provide for a meaningful understanding of educational contexts and are particularly suited for interpretative research. Yamagata-Lynch (2010:78) posits that 'The goal of a case study is to truly understand a single case, and not to compare it with other cases in order to make general claims.'

According to Merriam (1998:34), 'a case study may be defined as the process used, the case or bounded unit, or the end product and that all may be appropriate definitions. In terms of an 'end product', she defines 'A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit' (Merriam, 1998:21). The most critical aspect of a case study is clearly identifying and articulating the scope and boundaries of the study (Stake, 1995); 'I can "fence in" what I

am going to study' (Merriam, 1998:27). In line with CHAT, I selected an object-oriented activity as a suitable unit of analysis for this case study. Before outlining the specifics of the unit of analysis I shall justify the timeframe for the research and motivate the selection of my workplace as a suitable site.

3.3.2.1 TIMEFRAME

Case studies may or may not be longitudinal (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The timing of the study was determined by what was feasible within the constraints of the Master's programme together with the time that the management of institution were directly engaged with the application for re-accreditation process, which spanned two years. The reason for studying a single accreditation process within a larger system of QA was to provide for a manageable scope for the given study. A longitudinal study on multiple QA processes at multiple sites of delivery may have offered different insights, but the available time was insufficient. The selection of a different QA activity or several QA activities may have revealed different and/or additional insights; for example, engaging with an application for accreditation of a new programme. The reason for selecting the re-accreditation process was intentional and this was due to the fact that the CHE had recently revised the re-accreditation process and was using it to pilot the new integrated accreditation framework. Therefore, it was particularly favourable that the specific accreditation process was selected, as the study will be able to contribute to an improved understanding of how this newly conceived framework plays out within a PHEI.

3.3.2.2 SITE SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION

Case studies that are informed by CHAT include both single (Engeström, 2003; Hardman, 2005) and multiple case study designs. Yagamata-Lynch (2010:63) argues that 'case studies are particularly compatible with the theoretical assertions and analytical intentions involved in activity systems analysis'. Given the limited resources available for the research, it was critical that a single case study was selected, to allow sufficient time to engage with the managers' experiences and perceptions of the re-accreditation process using CHAT and the AS to unpack the tensions and contradictions in a way that revealed the most salient aspects of the environment. This would allow for engagement with the key principles of illuminative evaluation ('instructional system' and the 'learning milieu') in an iterative and dialectic process of description and interpretation.

Furthermore, a context that was familiar to the researcher would aid in shedding light on the social and historical aspects, which would otherwise require a lengthy engagement (Flick, 2018). On a personal and pragmatic level, the study was driven by the fact that I am deeply interested in understanding quality assurance within my work environment and the elements and structures that inhibit and support quality development for me and my colleagues. Thus, the institution in which I was employed was selected. The decision to work with the institution as a whole, and not only the Main Campus, was based on the re-accreditation process itself, which called for the review of a programme across all campuses.

The institution offers a Diploma programme at two separate campuses with approximately 350 full-time students and 30 employees, inclusive of support and service staff. As the Quality Manager, I was responsible for coordinating the application for re-accreditation. This process included the planning and implementation of the internal programme review as well as the collection and interpretation of data and evidence required for writing up the application for re-accreditation.

There are several elements of this PHEI that are interesting, but not necessarily unique in private higher education, which helps to shape the understanding of the context within this study and better understand the impact of this re-accreditation process.

Firstly, because of the size and scope of the institution and the vocational orientation, the academic staff are responsible for teaching and learning as well as QA. However, they have limited training in these areas, since most of their expertise has been developed in industry, with limited engagement with research on QA, and thus their approach was practice-led. Secondly, unlike public institutions, PHEIs do not receive any funding from the DHET, and thus the institution relies solely on tuition fees to run the relevant programmes as well as to conduct research and all relevant QA activities. Therefore, the feasibility of conducting in-depth reviews is often restricted by the cost of such activities and the limited resources available to do so, as the institution strives to remain competitive and offer high-quality education and support services. Thirdly, quality within the institution has historically been driven by the need to be highly competitive within a niche market and to be responsive to the rapidly changing needs of the sector that it services. There is a strong focus on graduate readiness for employment, and thus the QA system was designed to promote a rapid turnaround time between collection of data and impact of changes, which can sometimes lead to a lack of overall coherence and in-depth analyses. Lastly, the legislation differentiates between public and private institutions, and there is still a perception that because the legislation was originally written by those within public HEIs (CHE, 2016), it does not serve

the needs of PHEIs, particularly those that are smaller, boutique institutions, because achievement of the expectations placed on these institutions may not be feasible, given the context-specific limitations and requirements. Although PHEIs are now recognised as valuable players in the higher education landscape, particularly in niche areas – as stated in the National Development Plan 2030 and the White Paper on Post-School Education (DHET, 2013) – there are still reservations regarding the consistent delivery of quality education, and the view that public institutions are the primary contributors to achieving national higher education objectives. The DHET acknowledges 'the complexity of the existing registration and quality assurance system for private providers' (DHET, 2013:43) and aims to streamline this process together with the CHE. As such the need to share responsibility for QA with PHEIs is essential.

It is also important to note that because the study was conducted within a single institution, looking at a single QA activity, I had the opportunity to engage deeply with the processes – looking both at what was intended and how these intentions played out. Furthermore, I worked within the site and was thus able to draw on experiences of the historical context of the organisation within the higher education landscape as well the culture within the organisation.

3.3.2.3 UNIT OF ANALYSES

The unit of analysis for this study is the activity of applying for re-accreditation, which is embedded in the social context within which the managers are situated. This AS is defined by Engeström (2000:960) as 'A historically evolving collective activity system, seen in its network relations to other activity systems, is taken as the prime unit of analysis against which scripted strings of goal-directed actions and automatic operations are interpreted.'

The AS includes the constituent parts: subject, tools, rules, community, division of labour, object and outcome. The activity of applying for re-accreditation was broadly identified as the unit of analysis for this study. This activity sits within the setting of developing and accounting for quality within higher education. One of the initial challenges of the study was to define the exact scope of the unit of analysis, in particular, the subject, the object and the outcome. The identification of these three aspects can dramatically shape the focus of the study. For example, when first starting out, I had identified the subject as the quality committee, which included academic managers and all academic staff. This meant that I would need to understand the actions of all of the members of the quality committee within the

re-accreditation process. However, I soon realised that this would lead the study away from the re-accreditation process and toward a discussion around quality of teaching and learning. I therefore narrowed the focus to academic management, as I wanted to understand the systemic and structural issues in relation to the EQA environment. Then I noted that this gave an incomplete picture of the re-accreditation process, and I expanded the subject group to include the administration and student support managers, thus providing for views from all departments within the institution.

Having defined the subject of the activity, I attempted to identify the object. The appropriate identification of the object of the activity is critical to any CHAT study and can dramatically shape the understanding of the activity. As Roth, Radford and LaCroix (2012:15) state 'activity theory is about: understanding the object in the right way'. The object gives meaning to the subject – the four managers – and offers a 'structured understanding of otherwise fragmented pieces of evidence' (Kaptelinin, 2005: 5). Thus, my main challenge was to identify an object that was meaningful to the subject yet limited the scope of the activity to a manageable unit of analysis. At first, I considered the object to be re-accreditation, but I realised that this would presuppose that all of the managers were deeply invested in this process. However, through careful analysis of the data it became evident that 'quality higher education' was the object of the activity, as it was the focus of all the managers as well as the CHE. Once I established this, I also realised that the application for re-accreditation was the *tool* that CHE proposed would positively mediate this object. The extent to which re-accreditation served as a *tool* to develop or account for quality is revealed in Chapter 4, where I unpack the historical and cultural aspects of the activity, namely the rules, the community and the division of labour. I realised that the unit of analysis could be contained through defining the *subject* and *object* together with the *tool* prescribed by the CHE.

3.3.2.4 PARTICIPANT SELECTION

The study is limited to the perspectives of management and does not include those of academic staff, support staff, students or other stakeholders. The institution has a total of 30 employees, four of whom are managers: The Principal, who is also a Director; the Head of Administration; the Academic Head of the second campus; and my role as Quality Manager, Academic Head of the Main Campus, as well as Director and Researcher. Because there were four managers in total who shared the same *object* within the AS, it was feasible to include all of them.

The level of direct engagement with the re-accreditation process varied between managers. At first, only the academic managers were selected for the interview process, as they were considered to be more directly engaged with the re-accreditation process. However, as the research progressed it became evident that the perspective of the Head of Administration was necessary in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the educational context, more specifically, the tensions and contradictions between the academic and administration departments and the different understandings of the re-accreditation purpose and process. The delay in interviewing the Head of Administration may have impacted on her ability to recall her experiences at the time of re-accreditation.

3.3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative methods of data collection were adopted for this study because this 'permits inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context and nuance' (Patton, 2002:227), and is frequently adopted for educational research. It can be argued that a qualitative research approach is helpful to understand the multiple perspectives and variety of lived experiences of management within the activity of applying for re-accreditation. Informed by illuminative evaluation, multiple data gathering techniques were used for this study. Parlette and Hamilton (1972) argue that observation, together with interviews and background inquiry, enable the researcher to develop an informed account of the 'innovation' in operation. In the following sections I describe the implementation of these methods and identify and discuss important and relevant issues.

3.3.3.1 INTERVIEWS WITH KEY PARTICIPANTS

Aligned with the illuminative evaluation approach, this study views interview data as evidence to be used to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the management of the institution. The purpose of the interviews was not to establish facts but rather to shed light on the views and perceptions of the managers within the institution, as these shape the interpretation of their realities.

Informal conversational interviews were used, together with in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Informal conversational interviews took place spontaneously either during, or directly after one of the internal or external workshops conducted as part of the preparation for re-accreditation, in order to unpack the participant's experience, check information and relate these findings to the overarching activity. Within these situations the questions posed were not pre-defined and were posed in relation to

the context. At the time, the participant may not be aware that they are being interviewed (Meston, 1993). Notes were taken shortly after the interview and interviewer interpretations were shared with the relevant participant to confirm accuracy and / or to gain a deeper understanding.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with the management staff of the institution a few months after submission of the application for re-accreditation to allow time to observe the impact of the re-accreditation process. The purpose of these interviews was to explore the perspectives that the participants have about the re-accreditation process.

The *interview schedule* consisted of four main questions which were aligned to the guiding questions of the study: 1) understanding of the re-accreditation; 2) engagement with the re-accreditation process; 3) tensions and contradictions; and 4) the impact of re-accreditation. Sub-questions for each main question, relating to the nodes in the AS, were also outlined and were posed as prompts when the participant did not address all aspects of the AS. To encourage the participants' 'own voice', open-ended interview questions were used. The interview schedule was designed and then piloted with an academic head at another PHEI of a similar size, in order to test the suitability of the instrument. The participant had completed a re-accreditation process two years prior, so some of the questions were a little challenging for her to answer. As a result of this process, the number of sub-questions was reduced in order to streamline the process. Overall, the schedule served effectively to surface experiences in relation to the activity of re-accreditation. As the researcher, I did not of course interview myself, but I did reflect on the interview questions in my journal as they related to my position as Quality Manager.

The in-depth semi-structured interviews were between 40 and 60 minutes in length and were conducted face to face with the Main Campus managers and via Skype with the second campus managers in a private space at the institution. Permission to conduct audio recordings of each interview was requested and granted by each participant. Prior to each interview, I wrote down my expectations, concerns, and assumptions for each of the participants in order to be more aware of my own biases, noting how these could shape my participation in the interview. During the interview, I reflected on my understanding of the feedback provided, for verification and clarification purposes. After completion of the interview, I made notes on my overall impression of each participant in terms of tone and body language, as well as my personal experience of the interview. I also noted any differences in perspectives between the informal conversation interviews that were conducted during the re-accreditation process and the semi-structured interviews to account for the possible reconstruction of memories of the re-accreditation process due to the laps of time between the re-accreditation process

and the informal interviews. I transcribed the interviews verbatim using Transcribe. I selected the manual transcription process so that I could make note of the subtleties of tone and emphasis on words that I may not have picked up had I used the automated option.

Chelisa and Preece (2005) argue that the individual interview technique presents problems that relate to the power relationship between the participant and the researcher. It is relevant to note that I may have been perceived as the dominant role-player in the interview process, not only because I was the researcher, but because I am also the academic director. I focused on developing trust by highlighting this concern and encouraging the participant to critically interrogate the current practice. I regularly noted that I was not looking for the 'right answer' or what was expected by external quality assurers, and asked participants to rather focus on their experience of the situation.

3.3.3.2 DOCUMENTARY AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to Parlet and Hamilton (1972), documentary and background information form an important part of an Illuminative evaluation, as it can offer an historical perspective of the context as well as provide data that are unavailable through other sources. It can also be used to identify areas of enquiry, topics for review or aspects that would otherwise have been missed. The following documentation was reviewed, and any concerns or irregularities were noted and compared with feedback gathered during interviews as well as participant observations.

The application for re-accreditation and supporting documents. The application for re-accreditation was carefully examined as the *tool* that was prescribed by the CHE, together with the quality improvement plan which was prepared as a result of this process.

Legislative documents relating to programme accreditation and re-accreditation. Current QA legislation, inclusive of frameworks and criteria for programme accreditation, were examined to shed light on the legislative landscape. In addition, documents relating to the proposed revised integrated QA framework were reviewed in order to get a picture of the direction in which the CHE is considering moving, and because this process may be shaping the perspectives of management and the CHE in relation to the current re-accreditation process.

The CHE and HEQC founding documents and annual reports. The HEQC founding document together with the strategic plans and annual reports for the past 10 years, and any evaluations of the CHE and the

HEQC, were examined in order to understand the current and historical mission, aims, objectives, values and plans of the quality assurer and how these have changed over the past 10 years.

Communication between the PHEI and the CHE as well as within the PHEI. Communication between the PHEI and the CHE provided evidence of the timeline, the tone of the interaction between these two entities, the timing of the information provided by the CHE, and the nature of the request to participate in the re-accreditation, as well as communication of the re-accreditation outcome. Email communication between the Academic Head and I was also referred to, as it shed light on the process of compiling the application for re-accreditation.

The QA policies of the PHEI. The current and historical policies and procedures that related directly to the quality management and QA were referred to, in order to understand the professed view on IQA and how this view changed over a period of 10 years.

The strategic plans of the institution. The strategic plan was reviewed in order to understand the mission, values, objectives and quality priorities of the institution.

Workshop presentations and supporting documents. I conducted several internal workshops in preparation for applying for re-accreditation. The Academic Head and I attended external information-sharing workshops hosted by the CHE on the re-accreditation process, and I attended a short course on QA and a collaborative workshop with other PHEIs on accreditation. The presentations and supportive documents for external workshops were reviewed to assist with understanding the larger higher education community. The presentations and supporting documents for internal workshops were examined to better understand the intended internal process of accreditation and compare it with the lived experience of the managers.

3.3.3.3 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In order to understand the nuances and complexity of the 'learning milieu' within illuminative evaluation, emphasis is placed on the observation of the 'innovation' – in this case the application for re-accreditation. According to Parlet and Hamilton (1972), the process of observation is used to glean information such as tacit assumptions, interpersonal relationships and status differentials, that may not necessarily be surfaced during formal one-on-one interviews. Observation is continuous and includes records of events, interactions and informal remarks. Interpretative comments are noted as part of the documenting of the activity. The observation process is shaped by the relevant stages of the study; in

the first stage, observations are unstructured; in the second stage, they are more directed and systematic; and in the third stage, observation is highly selective and is used to pinpoint contradictions and tensions.

Because I was both participator and observer within my current workplace, I had access to observe events from within the institution, and at the same time was faced with the challenge of not accepting the familiar viewpoints without question. As Flick (2018:229) puts it: 'Researchers who seek to obtain knowledge about relations in the studied field, which transcends everyday understanding, also have to maintain the distance of the "professional stranger".' The challenge lies in carrying out these observations sensitively and in a way that reveals the subtleties of the situations; therefore, strict observation schedules were not used as they may hinder this attempt. Despite the critique that observations can be subjective and selective, when applied together with other forms of data collection, they serve to engage directly with the phenomenon rather than through accounts provided by participants (Merriam, 1998).

3.3.4 Data Selection, Processing and Interpretation

The interpretation of data was conducted throughout the data collection process in order to identify emerging themes and patterns that needed to be focused on and investigated further (Gold, in Chelisa & Preece, 2005). Aligned to the illuminative evaluation approach, this continuous process of data interpretation took the form of three distinctive phases.

The first phase commenced concurrently with the application for re-accreditation process and lasted until a month after all the participant interviews were completed. I started by organising the collected data into the categories below in order to reference them easily:

- Interview transcriptions
- Accreditation legislation and guidelines
- Application for re-accreditation documentation
- CHE founding documents
- Email communication within the institution as well as between the institution and the CHE
- Institutional policies that related to the QA
- The institution's strategic plans
- Workshop documentation – internal

- Workshop documentation – external
- Field notes.

I reviewed the documentation throughout this process and freely noted questions, comments, insights and other points of interest on the respective documents, and at times on separate notes that I filed within the relevant folder. As questions arose, I would either search out additional documentation or ask one of the participants in passing.

Once I had organised and reviewed all the data, I commenced the second phase, in which I coded the interview transcriptions using the AS nodes. I referred to the literature on CHAT to draw up relevant questions (contained in Appendix D: Interpretation of activity system nodes and terms used in this study) for each node in order to ensure consistency and the selection of relevant data. I used this process to create the AS for the PHEI. I coded the external workshop documentation together with the re-accreditation legislation and guidelines in the same way, in order to create the AS for the CHE. At this stage I did not review the rest of the data, because I was concerned with the participants' lived experiences.

Referring to the coded data, I wrote up a vignette of each of the manager's experiences of the re-accreditation process. I structured each vignette into the following sections, which were aligned to the guiding questions:

- Beliefs about quality, QA and accreditation;
- Participation in the re-accreditation process; and
- Tensions and contradictions.

I did not create a separate section for the final sub-question, which focused on elements that promote or inhibit quality development, because these were woven into the other three sections. This process helped me to narrow the selection of data to that which were relevant to the research sub-questions and to form a picture of how each manager perceived and participated in the accreditation process, noting also how they responded to tensions and contradictions. I then referred to the other data sources listed above and noted any further contradictions.

In the third and final phase, I reviewed all four cases, selecting only the data that revealed the tensions and contradictions. I organised the data using CHAT to surface three types of contradictions that arose within the activity of applying for re-accreditation. The following types of contradictions were identified:

- Contradictions within the activity node – for example, between application of the knowledge of higher education (*tool*) and how this relates to the use of the re-accreditation application form (*tool*).
- Contradictions between nodes within the activity – for example, between the Academic Head (*subject*) and the policies that govern IQA (*rules*).
- Contradictions between node and other Ass – for example, between the way the PHEI uses the application for re-accreditation form (*tool* – Institution), and way the CHE expects the application form to be applied (*tool* – CHE).

I analysed the tensions and contradictions within the PHEI AS, noting and combining those that were consistently evident within two or more participants. I also noted tensions that were evident between the AS of the PHEI and that of the CHE. I did not, however, interpret contradictions *within* the CHE's system, as that was outside the scope of the research. I used CHAT to interpret how the participants responded to these tensions and contradictions and to identify opportunities for expansion.

As with any interpretive study, the challenge lay in synthesising the data. Gordon (1991) warns that 'the editing job becomes formidable, and constant questions of selection bias must be resolved' by a researcher who is both knowledgeable of the context, highly self-aware and able to differentiate between personal bias and 'hunches' in order to identify significant 'themes'. I therefore attempted to present the findings in a way that can be scrutinised for bias, misrepresentation, or misunderstanding. I critically and regularly reflected on my own value judgements, and presented my emerging findings to the participants and to my supervisor, for examination. Although this three-phase process was laborious and time-consuming, it ensured that the data that were selected and interpreted were relevant to the research questions, and enabled me to not only have a broad overview of the context, but also an in-depth understanding of the nuanced tensions and contradictions within and between the participants that made up the *subject* of the activity.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The goal of the study was to provide an improved understanding of how management within a PHEI understood and engaged with the application for re-accreditation process legislated by the CHE, and the tensions and contradictions that arose within this process, and not to offer explanations or generalisable contributions to educational improvement. Ethical decisions were informed by the aim to achieve a

deeper understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of management within this context. However, because of my dual position as researcher as well as Quality Manager, I had to remain conscious of making ethical decisions from the perspective of researcher and not Quality Manager, especially how they related to my dealings with the relevant participants in the study. Hammersley and Traianou (2012) warn that ethical judgements could be negatively affected by this dual role. I attempted to be transparent about my roles and to voice any dilemmas and tensions as they arose, with the aim of maintaining the participants' trust and encouraging open and honest dialogue about the context. It is unrealistic to believe that this completely negated the imbalance of power or perceived power, but I hope that by encouraging discussion and the acceptance of a variety of perspectives, an atmosphere of trust was maintained.

Aligned to this objective, participant confidentiality remained a priority; the names of the institution and of the participants were disguised, and any identifiable features were removed from the report as far as possible. The opportunity for verbal clarification was provided to participants.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I explained how illuminative evaluation informed the research methodology and how CHAT was used to guide data selection, processing and interpretation, taking the research sub-questions into consideration. I discussed how and why the key participant interviews were used as the primary data sources and how they were supplemented and compared with data from participant observations and the review of documentation to highlight connections as well as tensions and contractions within the ASs of the managers. This ensured that relevant data were selected and triangulated using a variety of collection methods to create a rich description of the important themes and patterns. Any data that were not directly relevant to the activity of applying for re-accreditation and the inherent tensions and contradictions were excluded to ensure that the scope of the study was manageable.

In this chapter I present the findings of the study by first providing an interpretation of the context, through the lens of CHAT, and then illuminating the tensions and contradictions that arose during the activity of applying for re-accreditation. I start by describing the AS of the CHE and the PHEI, followed by a discussion of the managers' historical and socially situated beliefs in the *'Beliefs about quality, quality assurance and accreditation'* section, as these perceptions shape the way in which the *subject* engages with the application for re-accreditation.

I arranged the findings in the remainder of the chapter according to the tensions and contradictions that were identified within the three key themes that emerged from the data through the application of thematic analysis: conceptualising a developmental approach to re-accreditation; attempting to conduct a meaningful programme review; and balancing the tension between development and accountability. Within these themes, I discuss the subjects' engagement with the *mediating tools* together with the cultural and historical elements, *rules, community and division of labour* when analysing the tensions that occur within and between these nodes. I use CHAT to interpret, compare and contrast how the managers responded to these tensions and contradictions, analysing the elements that enabled or constrained their ability to expand their activity.

4.1.1 CHE Activity System

In this section I provide a brief discussion of the AS of the CHE, depicted in Figure 5, pointing out the AS nodes that are relevant to the re-accreditation of PHEIs and directly or indirectly influence the PHEI's AS, which will be discussed in the following section.

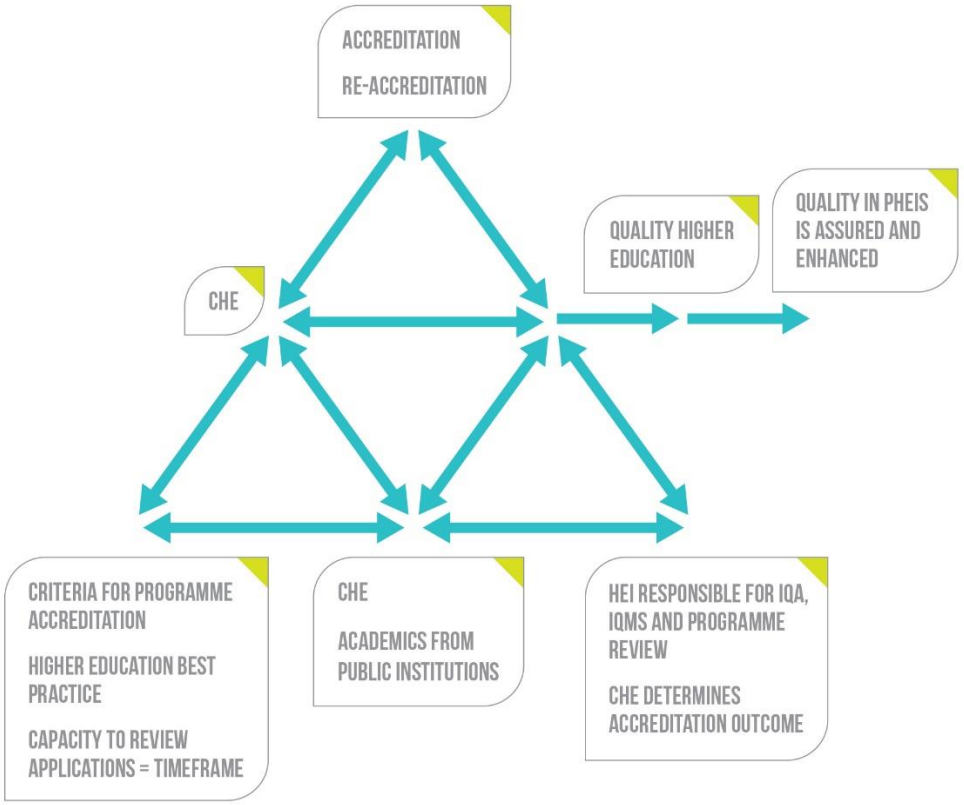

Figure 5: CHE's activity of accrediting/re-accrediting PHEIs

The CHE is responsible for quality higher education in South Africa and recently introduced the integrated QA framework, in which re-accreditation is situated towards the quality enhancement side of the quality control–quality enhancement continuum, as indicated in Figure 6. CHE positions re-accreditation as an effective *tool,* together with training workshops on re-accreditation, to address ongoing quality in PHEIs.

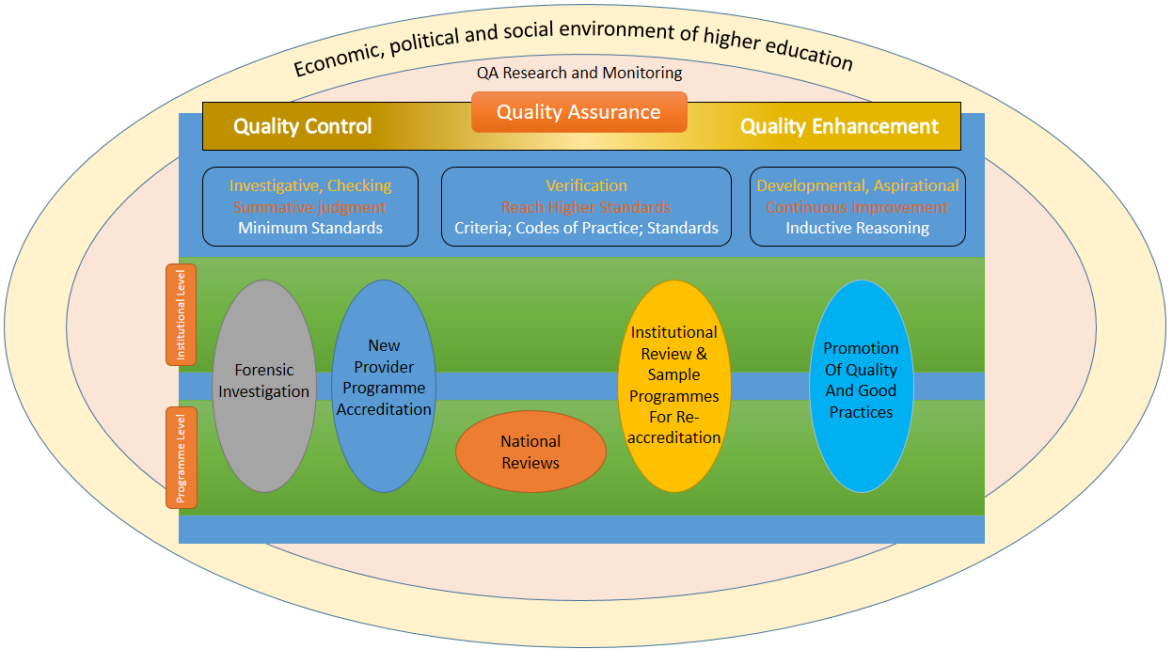

Figure 6: A diagram of the proposed integrated QA framework (CHE, 2017)

The predominant *rules* that guide the programme accreditation model include: 1) the programme accreditation criteria which specify the minimum quality standards that all programmes are required to meet in order to be accredited; and 2) the timeframe for review of applications, which is determined by the capacity of the CHE to address the volume of applications submitted by HEIs.

The design of the criteria is based on international best practice and was developed by the CHE in consultation with academics predominantly from public institutions. This *community* is characterised by a lack of involvement by academics from small PHEIs.

The *division of labour* highlights the power that rests with the CHE, which determines whether institutions comply with the Criteria for Programme Accreditation and decides whether not to accredit or to re-accredit a programme or to accredit/re-accredit with conditions. Although the CHE determines the accreditation outcome, the HEIs are responsible for IQA, IQMS and programme reviews:

> … the primary responsibility for the quality assurance of programme quality lies with the HEI's themselves through robust internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms and an effective functional internal quality management system (IQMS) that enables higher

education institutions (HEIs) to conduct their own institutional and programme reviews as part of a regular internal quality review cycle. (CHE, 2017:26)

The intended *outcome* of re-accreditation is that quality within PHEIs is assured and enhanced.

4.1.2 Managers Within the PHEI Activity System

In the previous section I presented an overview of the CHE's AS. I now discuss the AS, depicted in Figure 7, of the PHEI under study, having identified the managers as the appropriate *subject*, as they engage with the application for re-accreditation.

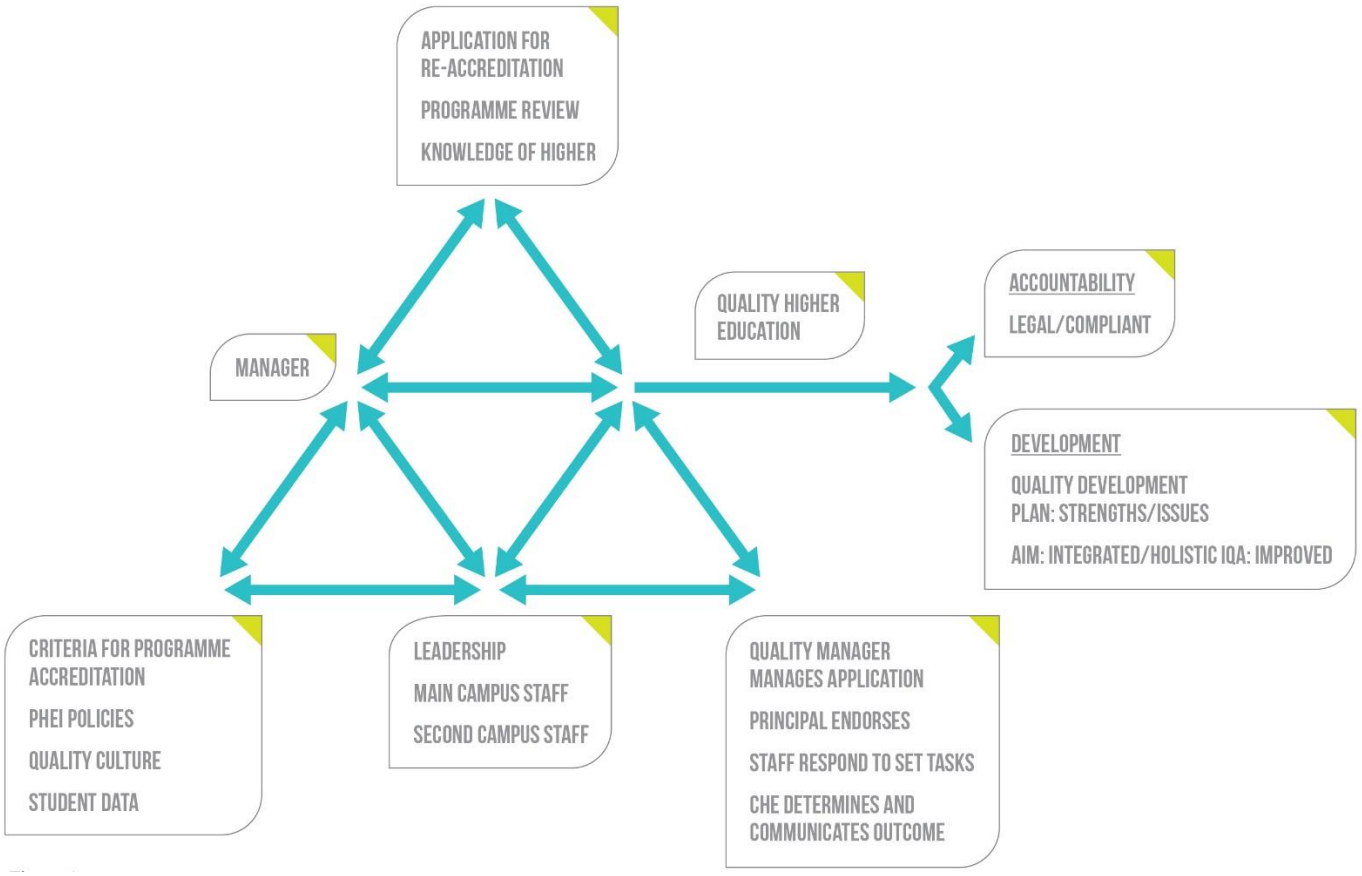

Figure 7: Managers within a PHEI activity of applying for re-accreditation

The PHEI is required to demonstrate that they offer a quality programme, by submitting a successful application for re-accreditation that is based on an in-depth programme review. These *tools* together with knowledge of higher education best practice are used as a means to account for and develop quality. The Criteria for Programme Accreditation as well as the internal policies, access to student data and institutional culture that shape the attitude and values regarding accreditation, are the *rules* that guide the application for re-accreditation process. The *community* involved in this process was made up of the leadership and the academic and administration staff at each of the two campuses. Within this community, the *division of labour* was as follows: The Quality Manager was responsible for managing the application for accreditation and assigned tasks to various staff members. The Principal endorsed the need for accreditation and the CHE assessed and re-accredited the programme. The *outcome* was twofold: firstly, the application complied with the criteria and the programme was re-accredited and thus the institution could legally continue to offer the programme. Secondly, the review highlighted strengths and issues and resulted in the development and implementation of a five-year quality improvement plan, which aims to put mechanisms in place to enhance student success and to adopt a more integrated and holistic approach to IQA.

4.2 BELIEFS ABOUT QUALITY, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION

In the previous sections I provided an overview, using the AS model, of the re-accreditation process stipulated by the CHE and then described how this shaped the AS of the PHEI. I now discuss the findings in relation to the managers' understandings of quality, QA and accreditation. The first theme that emerged from the data was regarding quality and the variety of interpretations that were evident among the managers.

4.2.1 VARYING CONCEPTIONS ABOUT QUALITY

From the data, it is apparent that the Principal was motivated to start an institution out of a need to address the mismatch between the graduate competencies and the skills requirements of the industry that he had observed while teaching at another institution. He founded the school almost 20 years ago together with a partner. The Head of Administration joined two years later, when the two Directors were responsible for running the school and were the only lecturers. The school grew from three to thirty staff, and the Principal and Head of Administration both had to adapt and respond to the changes

as a result of this growth, as well as to external developments including the requirement for accreditation.

I was the fourth consultant to advise the Principal on accreditation and was first contracted by the Principal in 2012. Soon after, I was appointed as the Quality Manager and was later offered Directorship when the co-founder resigned. The current Academic Head joined the Institution three years prior to the application for re-accreditation was conducted, shortly after the second campus was opened.

The managers' experience prior to joining the institution was varied. Although they all had prior experience in the industry as well as in private higher education, with the exception of the Academic Head, who worked in a public university, I am the only manager who had a formal qualification in education and experience in programme review, QA and accreditation. It may be relevant to note that the Academic Head and I have postgraduate qualifications and that the Principal and Academic Head have experience in teaching in film. The Head of Administration has worked in the administration departments of three other private institutions.

Since the school was founded, quality has been high on the Principal's agenda. In the data he regularly referred to the need to maintain a brand that is known for its professionalism, integrity and award-winning student work. His vision for the school is to be one of the top institutions in the world that offers education in the film sector and that effectively prepares graduates for a successful career. The Head of Administration acknowledged that although the awards for the graduate films were nice, they were less important than gaining the recognition of employers. She said that the focus has always been on the graduates and ensuring that they have the knowledge and skills to be able to work from the outset:

> '.. [the graduates] come out and they don't need additional training … It's about the students that do graduate, that are able to walk into jobs and are competent.' (Head of Administration – interview)

She believes that a lot of work has gone into improving the quality of the school and that this is evident in the positive reputation that it has forged with industry. She believes that this is due to prioritising the needs of industry when making improvements to the programme in order to ensure that the graduates are industry-ready:

> '… it's taken years to build those relationships and build the reputation. And we're always wanting to improve the programme and always wanting to make sure that it's in line with what the industry needs and wants.' (Head of Administration – interview)

In addition to this interpretation of quality, the Academic Head and I understand quality as continuously evolving. We believe that it is synonymous with critically reflecting on practice in an ongoing cycle of reviewing and improving the structures, processes and beliefs that promote student learning. This results in students who are prepared for employment – equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitude to contribute meaningfully to the industry. The Academic Head places student success central to the discussion around quality:

> 'In terms of improving quality, to think about what we do, … understanding our at-risk students … looking at student throughput and helping students be more successful at what they do. I think it will in turn improve quality, … the quality of the student, the quality of the work, the quality of the institution.' (Academic Head – interview)

Relating these beliefs to Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptualisations of quality, it is evident that the Principal and the Head of Administration view quality as excellence and fitness for purpose, while the Academic Head and I view it as fitness for purpose and transformation. There is an overlap with the CHE's definition as fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993) outlined in the framework for programme accreditation (HEQC, 2004) and later reaffirmed in the discussion document: An integrated approach to quality assurance in higher education (CHE, 2017), where the interpretation of transformation is clarified:

> Where Harvey and Green had conceptualised quality as the transformation of the student as an individual, in the CHE's use of the term this was extrapolated to the transformation of an institution in a particular social context. In such a view, a quality institution would be one that, taking the legacies of apartheid and inequality in South Africa into account, transforms itself in such a way that it adds great value to the learning of individuals, enhances greatly the present knowledge, skills and abilities in the country, and develops an identity and a purpose that fulfils social justice imperatives and is fully appropriate to the South African context. (CHE, 2017:4)

4.2.2 The Perceived Value of Accreditation

The second theme that emerged from the data is regarding accreditation and the extent to which the managers value it as a mechanism to support their conceptions of quality. The Principal and Head of Administration do not value accreditation as a tool to improve quality but see it primarily as a legal requirement for the operation of the business and thus as an issue of compliance. The Principal is very wary of the fact that the CHE has the power to shut the school down, and is acutely aware of the implications of not meeting the relevant standards:

> 'I consider what you're doing with the [CHE] all legal, if we take a wrong step here then we could jeopardise the school, we could get into trouble, we could be sued, we could get shut down, whatever the case is. So, the value for me is that we have a business that's within regulation and that we're offering a qualification that is approved by the Department [of Education]. So … for me the value is that we remain compliant.' (Principal – interview)

The Head of Administration brought attention to the fact that historically it was also a business decision, and that without accreditation the institution would lose revenue from students who would be unable to apply for a student loan unless the institution was registered:

> 'We knew we had to move in that direction because banks wouldn't fund you if you weren't accredited, well they wouldn't fund your students. Students couldn't get student loans if you weren't registered and accredited as an institution.' (Head of Administration – interview)

Both the Principal and the Head of Administration view accreditation as a way to gain recognition and credibility and increase the value of the school and the qualification. In the interview with the Principal, he stated that 'it's good for the value of the business, and the qualification, because we have to keep evolving'.

In addition to the above views, the Academic Head and I consider accreditation to be a vehicle to improve quality. The Academic Head suggested that 'maybe [re-accreditation] just fast-tracked the process of improving quality' and helped to identify areas of best practice that the institution may have taken longer to identify and implement.

I noted in my journal that I believed that accreditation helped us to engage with quality criteria that had been developed as a result of extensive research that we, as a small institution, do not have the capacity to undertake. I also noted that it provided me with the motivation to complete an in-depth review and

to reflect on long-term trends, without which these activities may not be prioritised.

Through my observations of the internal workshops, it was evident that the staff involved engaged with the Criteria for Programme Accreditation as a starting point for debating and addressing quality issues, rather than purely as a means to account for quality only. This was consistent with my view and that of the Academic Head that the re-accreditation be used as an opportunity to develop a holistic understanding of what was working, what was not working, and what could be put in place to enhance quality and the quality management system (QMS) going forward.

In summary, the findings that surfaced from the data illustrate that the perceived value of accreditation is twofold. Firstly, it ensures that the school can continue to operate as an accredited provider by demonstrating that the school has a robust IQA system and programme review process. Secondly, it may be used as an instrument to critically review the programme over a longer period of time, and to identify the issues that exist within the programme and the institution and how these can be addressed in an ongoing cycle of quality enhancement.

4.2.3 The Relationship Between Accreditation and IQA

The third theme that surfaced from the data was regarding the relationship between accreditation and QA within the PHEI.

In my journal, I commented that I found that the Criteria for Programme Accreditation provided a helpful model against which to develop the IQA system for the institution, and attempted to use them to identify areas within the institution that may require improvement. I also mentioned that I strived to design an IQA system that: 1) prioritises spaces for meaningful reflection and healthy debate, and 2) for recording observations, insights, decisions and recommendations in ways that promote ease of access for planning and reporting, while 3) attempting to keep the administration workload to a minimum.

The Academic Head viewed accreditation as an opportunity to develop quality and reflected that it became clear to her during the re-accreditation process how well the internal QA systems and structures were aligned to the criteria for programme accreditation. She also pointed out that further integration of these guidelines could only be applied by academics who held a broad understanding of quality in higher education and the relationship between day-to-day tasks, IQA processes and EQA requirements.

Despite viewing accreditation as predominantly a legal requirement, the Principal recognised that the Criteria for Programme Accreditation and the way they were integrated into the school provided a language to talk about and engage with quality. He reflected that although he has always prioritised quality, he did not have the means to communicate what he meant and yet demanded quality:

> 'I think I always wanted to achieve that quality, but I never had solutions on how. I always just enforced it … we want better quality. But what you've done together with the CHE is you've structured it, you've created criteria that would say if we want to get better [quality of work], we've got to improve the curriculum …, bring people in, do more exercises, do more assignments, you know, bulk up the curriculum, … the way that you do things is quite amazing, because you constantly listening and you constantly taking information and then placing it where you're going to need it, even six months from now.' (Principal – interview)

The Principal was initially resistant to the QA systems and acknowledged that at first, he perceived it to be unnecessary and a waste of time: '… at the beginning when we started doing it then I was like ah damnit, … why are you asking us if we're doing a great job?' (interview with the Principal). However, he acknowledged that when he witnessed how IQA informed decisions and actions and improved the quality of the programme, he fully endorsed it:

> 'I was always arrogant when I would go to these CHE things, you know I'd be like "Ya we're doing this, ya we're amazing, we do that anyway". And they'd be like how? Oh no we just talk about it over lunch and then everyone knows, and then they'd be like but you don't have an actual system, you're not meeting, you know there isn't an agenda, it was like I always felt we're wasting time, but what I hadn't realised is that you actually go and collect all those stats and at the end of the year you go "remember that thing that we discussed, we did this …. and look how amazing this has become because of this."' (Principal – interview)

Reviewing the interview data and comparing them to the historical documentation on the IQMS and accreditation, it is evident that for the first five years that the institution was accredited, QA within the institution was conducted purely for the purposes of compliance. The Head of Administration noted that historically the development of policies and procedures was purely for the purpose of meeting accreditation requirements, and that they were not used by the institution for QA. This may have been due in part to the fact that there was limited understanding of accreditation. On several occasions the

Head of Administration reflected that she did not know how they achieved accreditation in the past – not because she felt the quality of the programme was inferior, but rather because she did not understand the accreditation requirements and what CHE was asking for:

> 'I don't know how I did it the first time. I'm not sure how we got it. That was my first thought … I actually don't know how we got it the first time. It was pure fluke. I swear... like I said, I had no idea what I was doing. I was thumb-sucking, I was literally thumb-sucking ... I just winged it. But you know me, I'm good at that.' (Head of Administration – interview)

The view that accreditation is separate to IQA still lingers for the Head of Administration and the Principal, but they both acknowledge that despite the increased administrative burden, accreditation has helped to improve quality, at least in the last five years:

> '… if it means we have to do reviews and we have to do accreditations, and as much as those processes can seem quite tedious at times and quite heavy, the end result is great if we look at the stats and look at what we've done.' (Principal – interview)

The Principal believes that despite the limitations in personal autonomy, accreditation and IQA are beneficial to the institution. Even though he views it primarily as a legal requirement, he believes the quality of the programme has improved as a result of the design and implementation of the IQA system in line with the criteria for programme accreditation. He joked: 'If someone had to ask me do you want the freedom to do your own thing, maybe on a Monday I'd say something different – haha, but absolutely not' (Principal – interview).

Having sketched the activity systems of the CHE and the PHEI, and having discussed the managers' underlying beliefs about quality and QA, I will dig a little deeper using CHAT to surface the tensions and contradictions within the activity of applying for re-accreditation. I present the relevant findings in the following three sections: 1) conceptualising a developmental approach to re-accreditation; 2) attempting to conduct a meaningful programme review; and 3) balancing the tension between development and accountability. Each of these will be characterised by a discussion of the relevant tension or contradiction, visually plotting it in the AS, followed by an analysis of the response(s) of the manager(s) to the disturbance in the AS.

4.3 CONCEPTUALISING A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO RE-ACCREDITATION

The first tension that was surfaced from the data occurred during the process of conceptualising how the institution planned to respond to the re-accreditation requirements. The recently revised re-accreditation form – the mandated *mediating tool* – was intended by the CHE to support and enable institutions to achieve the *object* of quality of higher education, by promoting an in-depth programme review together with the review of their IQMS and IQA activities, and to identify areas of best practice as well as interventions to address underperformance.

I embraced this opportunity and believed that the institution could develop and gain new insights into the way we do things by fully engaging with the Criteria for Programme Accreditation and the application for re-accreditation form, and using it to motivate a comprehensive, holistic and coherent programme review. However, I believed that to truly make the review effective we needed to identify what we, as an institution, wanted to address during the programme review and go beyond merely addressing the statements in the form. In this regard I faced two dilemmas, as illustrated by the dashed lines in Figure 8.

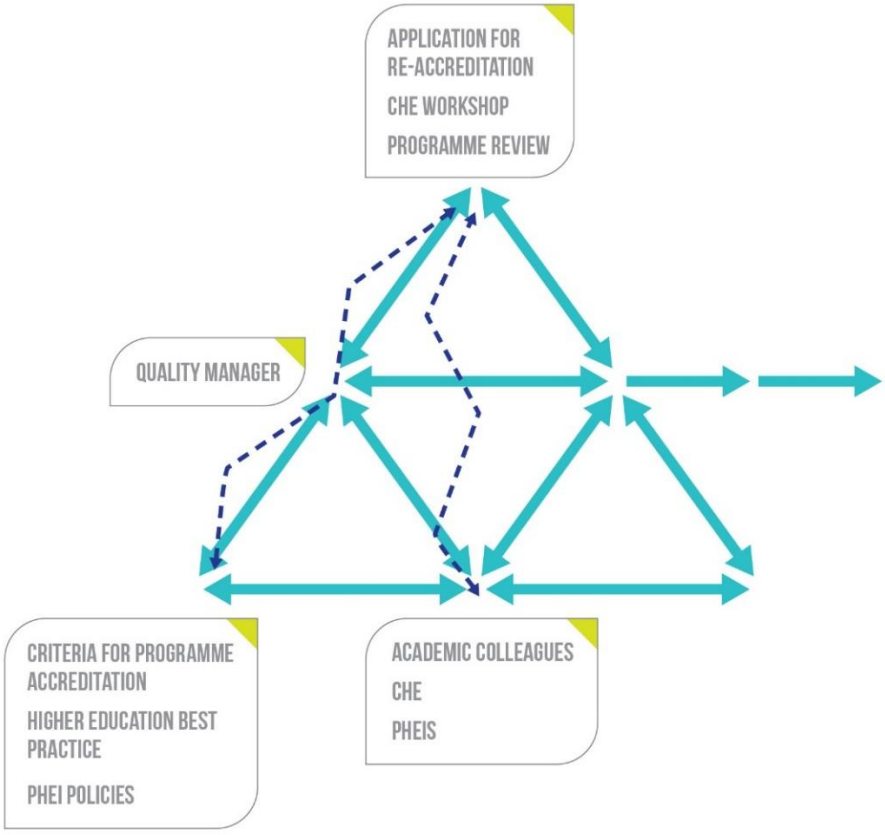

Figure 8: Tensions within the activity system when conceptualising a developmental approach to re-accreditation

The first dilemma was regarding my understanding and use of the *rules* – in this situation the criteria for programme accreditation, together with the institutional policies and higher education best practice – did not provide sufficient guidelines to conceptualise the programme review, the *mediating tool* proposed by the CHE to prepare for the application for re-accreditation. Although I was fairly familiar with the Criteria for Programme Accreditation, as I had been working with the Criteria for over 10 years, the CHE did not provide guidelines on how to approach a programme review. When turning to the internal policies, I discovered that although we had a detailed and extensive QMS and QA and monitoring procedures, there were no principles or guidelines on conducting a programme review. I had no prior experience or any theoretical knowledge in this area, and thus struggled to conceptualise a model and set of guiding principles that would equip me to prepare a coherent plan. I felt that despite attending the CHE re-accreditation workshops in October 2017 and March 2018 covering principles and practical guidelines on how to complete the application for re-accreditation, and finding them helpful as a *mediating artefact* to further understand the re-accreditation process – they did not address my need for an overarching conceptual framework in which to situate the review. I did not have the theoretical understanding of programme reviews, and therefore felt that I was ill equipped to conceptualise and design an in-depth and meaningful review.

The second tension was within the *community* node. I did not perceive anyone else in the institution to be knowledgeable in programme review, and I found the CHE to be unavailable or unwilling to engage on this topic. Historically the Principal had delegated all accreditation responsibilities to consultants and the Head of Administration, who had previously assisted the consultants to prepare the applications. After I joined the institution, the Head of Administration no longer viewed accreditation as her responsibility. The Academic Head was keen to get involved, but did not feel that she was sufficiently experienced or knowledgeable, and the academic staff were focused on programme delivery.

4.3.1 Analysis of the Managers' Response to the Contradictions

As summarised in Table 1, my response to the tension was to attempt to expand my activity; however, this resulted in a narrowing due to perceived constraints within the *community*. To gain a deeper understanding of the process, I tried to broaden my activity by engaging with a community outside the institution and consulting with other private providers through a workshop that I held on the topic of accreditation and programme review. I also attended a short course on QA in higher education, but these attempts did not help me to develop any new insights regarding the underlying principles and did

not assist me to develop the systematic and theoretically informed approach that I was hoping to achieve. I also referred to papers on programme review and became overwhelmed by the multitude of models, frameworks and approaches. As a result, my activity narrowed and focused purely on addressing the statements in the eight sections of the re-accreditation form. In my journal, I noted the following:

> 'I felt a bit like we were just addressing the immediate questions in the form without having a deeper understanding of their importance and value and the issues that they were attempting to address. Being more educated in this area, I believe, would have provided for a much more meaningful programme review process. I feel that our review was reflective, but not critically reflective. And that we may have merely got caught up with the superficial elements of the review and not sufficiently unpacked the underlying issues, assumptions and power that shaped the review process.' (Journal entry)

Table 1: Responding to contradictions when conceptualising the programme review

Actions	**Description of contradictions**	**Activity system tensions**	**Response to contradictions**
Conceptualising the programme review	*Dilemma:* Intention to apply a coherent and holistic approach to programme review but lacked the theoretical knowledge	Lacks the theoretical knowledge of programme review *(tools)* and higher education best practice *(rules)* and the support of a more knowledgeable other (*community)* to design a suitable internal programme review model	*Innovation attempt:* Created a community of practice, referred to policies and papers on programme review, attended CHE re-accreditation workshops/ training *Narrowing*: Just responded to the re-accreditation form

4.4 ATTEMPTING TO CONDUCT A MEANINGFUL PROGRAMME REVIEW

The second and third tensions that surfaced from the data occurred during the process of attempting to conduct a meaningful programme review. More specifically: 1) grappling with how to engage staff in critically reflecting on the programme, which was explicitly stated as a challenge, and 2) cultural and historical barriers that inhibited the managers' engagement in the re-accreditation process.

4.4.1 Engaging Staff in Critically Reflecting on the Programme

I noted in my journal that in my role as Quality Manager, and the person responsible for planning, co-ordinating and writing up the application for re-accreditation, it was my aim to use this application as an opportunity for quality development. Figure 9 summarises how I intended to use re-accreditation as a mediating tool to engage all staff (*community*) to critically reflect on our programme, policies and procedures (*rules*) and to conduct the programme review in a way that would increase staff capacity and gain a deeper understanding of IQA, as well as providing meaningful insights that would ultimately enhance student success (intended *outcome*). I planned to achieve this by engaging all staff in a series of workshops that both educated them on the Criteria for Programme Accreditation and provided opportunities for debate and discussion. I also planned to allocate tasks (*division of labour*) to specific groups over an extended period in order to split the workload.

The first workshop was conducted in July 2017, where I presented the aims and objectives of re-accreditation and the programme review – emphasising the need to make the process beneficial to our internal needs – together with the overall timeframe and interim deadlines. The second workshop was held in September 2017, where I divided staff into groups and allocated four of the quality criteria to each group. I asked them to reflect on the institution and programme performance in relation to these criteria, noting areas where we met or exceeded the criteria, and identifying interventions for criteria that we were not meeting.

On paper and at the beginning of the process we looked set to conduct a comprehensive and holistic in-depth review, where all staff members would be provided with the opportunity to engage in a meaningful way. However, as noted by the Academic Head, the way in which the re-accreditation was carried out within the PHEI did not provide sufficient opportunities for staff to engage:

> ‘It would have been nice to involve the staff more and be able to do it over a longer period of time. Because I think what ended up happening is it was quite rushed. We tried to include the staff as much as possible; their input was very valuable, but it was like a very quick, OK like help us with this information and then you and I pretty much went and did the rest.’ (Academic Head – interview)

In other words, what transpired was quite different to what was planned. By analysing these findings using CHAT I will illustrate how tensions within the AS inhibited engagement of staff. I reflected in my journal that although I believed that engaging others in a series of meaningful discussions and

workshops was critical to the review process and would be beneficial and of value to both the staff and the institution, I experienced two related factors that inhibited meaningful engagement by staff. Firstly, and indicated in figure 9 by the dashed lines, the staff and I were constrained by the *rules* – job role and workload allocation – in prioritising of time to dedicate to the programme review over and above our day-to-day responsibilities.

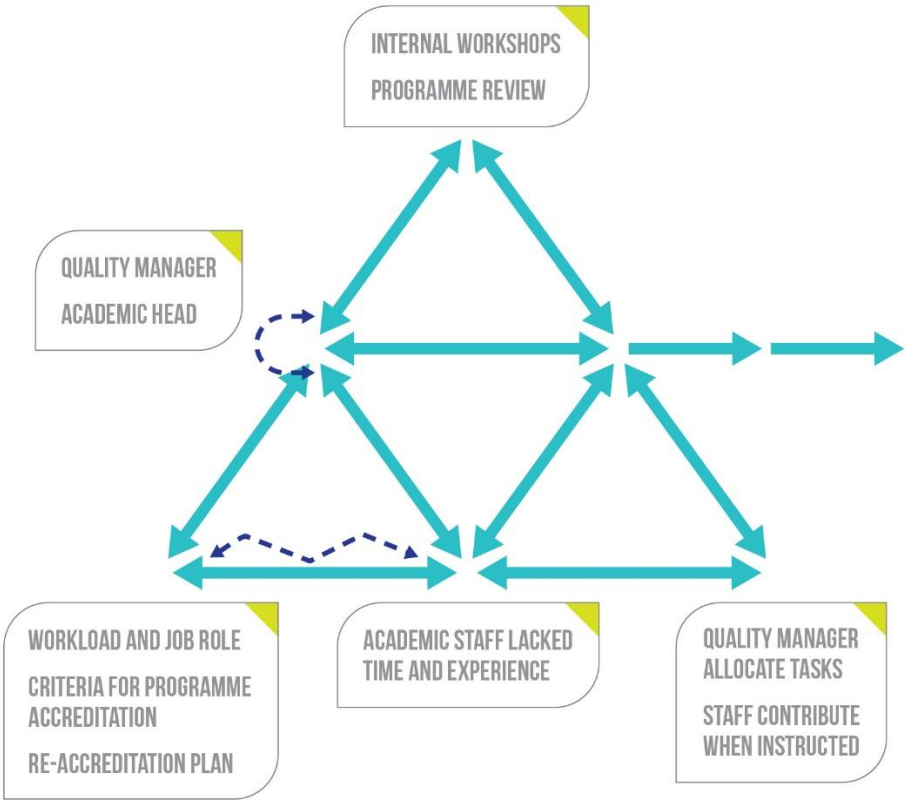

Figure 9: Tensions within the activity system when engaging staff in critically reflecting on the programme

I admit that I wasted time deliberating over the best approach and felt that I had no one to turn to in order to hash the process out, and I did prioritise day-to-day responsibilities until I could no longer put the review process off. In addition to juggling my own workload, I was acutely aware that any time I demanded of the academic staff would take away from their primary responsibilities related to teaching-learning and assessment. Also, administration staff were overloaded with the day-to-day admin responsibilities and the management staff with their management responsibilities. The Academic

Head added that a lack of experience in education, in particular among the second campus staff who had more recently joined the institution, also constrained their ability to understand the relevance and value of accreditation to their day-to-day work, and thus they did not prioritise time to contribute to the review process:

> 'I think it has a lot to do with just workload. The lecturers want to focus on what they need to do to get the students passed, so I think when you start asking them for documentation and they don't see the relevance or they don't see the bigger picture, it can be a little bit frustrating. [They may think] why do I have to do this document now, what relevance does it have in my life? I don't think that they're trying to be difficult or not be involved in the process. I just think because of workload. They know what they need to do and, it's possibly frustrating; I mean, I would probably have been frustrated when you're asking me for a report on this or that. [They may question] what do we need it for? The students have been assessed, they passed, why do you want to report on it? It is a bit frustrating, and I do understand, but it's got to go somewhere. They have to understand the bigger picture.' (Academic Head – interview)

It is interesting to note that the data revealed that the academic staff engaged more actively in the review process than the administration staff, and that they were more inclined to identify areas that required improvement. This may be due to the culture of their department and the integration of IQA into their day-to-day responsibilities. The Academic Head highlighted that these internal structures and systems were aligned to the EQA requirements and were becoming part of the culture ad habitual way of doing things within the academic department:

> 'You have implemented a lot of stuff in [quality committee] meetings … I think we're getting into the structures more naturally now … because we're thinking along these lines more than just how do we improve our programme.' (Academic Head – interview)

This is in contrast to the administration staff, who only identified what was working because they were concerned that the institution and/or their department may look bad, and that their already huge workload would increase if they identified issues that needed improvement.

Despite the relative engagement of academic staff, the Academic Head pointed out that more could be done to create opportunities for all staff to engage meaningfully, and in a way that their contributions would be of value, as well as to encourage staff to develop.

The second factor that inhibited the engagement of the academic staff was their inexperience in and lack of formal knowledge of programme review and accreditation, as well as of a holistic understanding of the relevance of EQA to their day-to-day responsibilities. In her interview, the Academic Head shared that she was eager to be involved but believed that her lack of experience prevented her from contributing more to the re-accreditation process, as well as inhibiting her understanding of what was covered in the CHE re-accreditation workshop:

> '… [the CHE workshop] was a bit over my head because it was my first one … I didn't know what they were talking about, so I felt a little bit like I was sinking and not swimming ...' (Academic Head – interview)

However, she believed that now that she has gone through the process of assisting me to prepare the application, she would find such a workshop more beneficial and would have sufficient experience to actively contribute to the next re-accreditation process: 'I think next time I would be a little bit more forthcoming with how we go about doing things. But just because I now understand the process' (Academic Head – interview).

In summary, the programme review was limited in its capacity as a *mediating artefact*, without addressing the lack of experience and knowledge within the *community*. This requires additional time – an already scarce resource – and effort to develop.

4.4.2 Analysis of the Managers' Response to the Contradictions

As summarised in Table 2, my response to this dilemma was to narrow my activity while planning to expand my activity in the future. During the re-accreditation process I experienced a personal loss (*subject*) that took much of my emotional energy; instead of responding to this situation by expanding my activity and drawing on my community, I narrowed it by reducing engagement with others, cancelling the remaining workshops and completing outstanding tasks on my own, except for instructing the Head of Administration to prepare and check the student data. I applied for a two-week extension and wrote the majority of the report in the last weeks. The report was checked by the Academic Head, while my assistant helped to compile relevant documents. I also used the QA and quality monitoring activities completed during the past three years to inform the review. It was predominantly through these activities that the insights of the various staff members became evident. Using CHAT to analyse this course of action, it becomes evident that I was guided by the cultural and historical rules within the institution that established that I was ultimately responsible for the application for re-accreditation, and

that asking for staff engagement was outside of their job role and their realm of knowledge and experience.

Table 2: Responding to contradictions when attempting to engage staff in critically reflecting on practice

Actions	**Description of contradictions**	**Activity system tensions**	**Response to contradictions**
Engaging staff in critically reflecting on practice	*Dilemma:* Despite planning to use the application for re-accreditation as an opportunity to critically reflect on practice, the staff workload inhibited the quality of the review	The workload *(rules)* constrained the ability of staff *(community)* to critically engage with the programme review	*Narrowed:* Requested an extension. Completed the bulk of the review process at the last minute and requested minor input from other staff members in order to complete by due date *Innovation attempt:* Developed the Quality Improvement Plan to create a phased approach to further integrating IQA activities into the day-to-day work of each department

In a final attempt to align the process to my original aims, I created a five-year quality improvement plan in response to the areas requiring development, which were identified when responding to the application for re-accreditation form. In this plan, I identified quality objectives, QA goals, and performance indicators, and allocated relevant committees which would be responsible for meeting these goals within a set time frame. However, this plan is only likely to be effective if integrated into the day-to-day activities of the *community* and their involvement is beneficial to their primary roles and responsibilities.

4.4.3 Cultural - Historical Influences on Engagement of Management

During the interviews the Principal and Head of Administration shared that they historically engaged with accreditation out of a necessity to ensure that the institution could operate legally. They viewed

accreditation in terms of ensuring compliance, and not as a means to develop quality. They also acknowledged that they did not have the knowledge to interpret and respond to the criteria for accreditation, and they both experienced high levels of stress in relation to accreditation because they did not know what was required and what was expected by the CHE, and that the CHE did not provide the support they needed. Therefore, consultants were previously appointed to assist with the accreditation processes.

Despite involving all staff in the two internal workshops as part of the recent re-accreditation process, neither the Principal nor the Head of Administration felt the need to contribute to the recent programme review or the application for re-accreditation:

> 'I was hardly involved, that's the truth, … I think it was done brilliantly and I also think that you bring a little bit of excitement to it … I saw you planning … on how to do it, how to schedule the meetings, a meeting with [the Academic Head] and then a meeting with the staff, so I think it was done brilliantly.' (Principal – interview)

When looking more closely at the AS over time, illustrated in Figure 10, it is evident that the Principal and Head of Administration did not view accreditation as a useful way of assisting them to develop quality education within their respective roles. The Principal did not perceive that his primary quality objectives – award-winning graduate films, employable graduates and a reputable school – were directly addressed through accreditation. Thus, the main tension, indicated in figure 10 by the dashed lines, was between the *mediating artefact* – the application for re-accreditation – and the *object* – quality higher education. The Criteria for Programme Accreditation as well as the framework for programme accreditation did not provide the means to make sense of accreditation, as these *rules* were outside of their area of knowledge. Furthermore, they had no interest in developing an understanding of these criteria, as they did not see their relevance to the *object* of their activity.

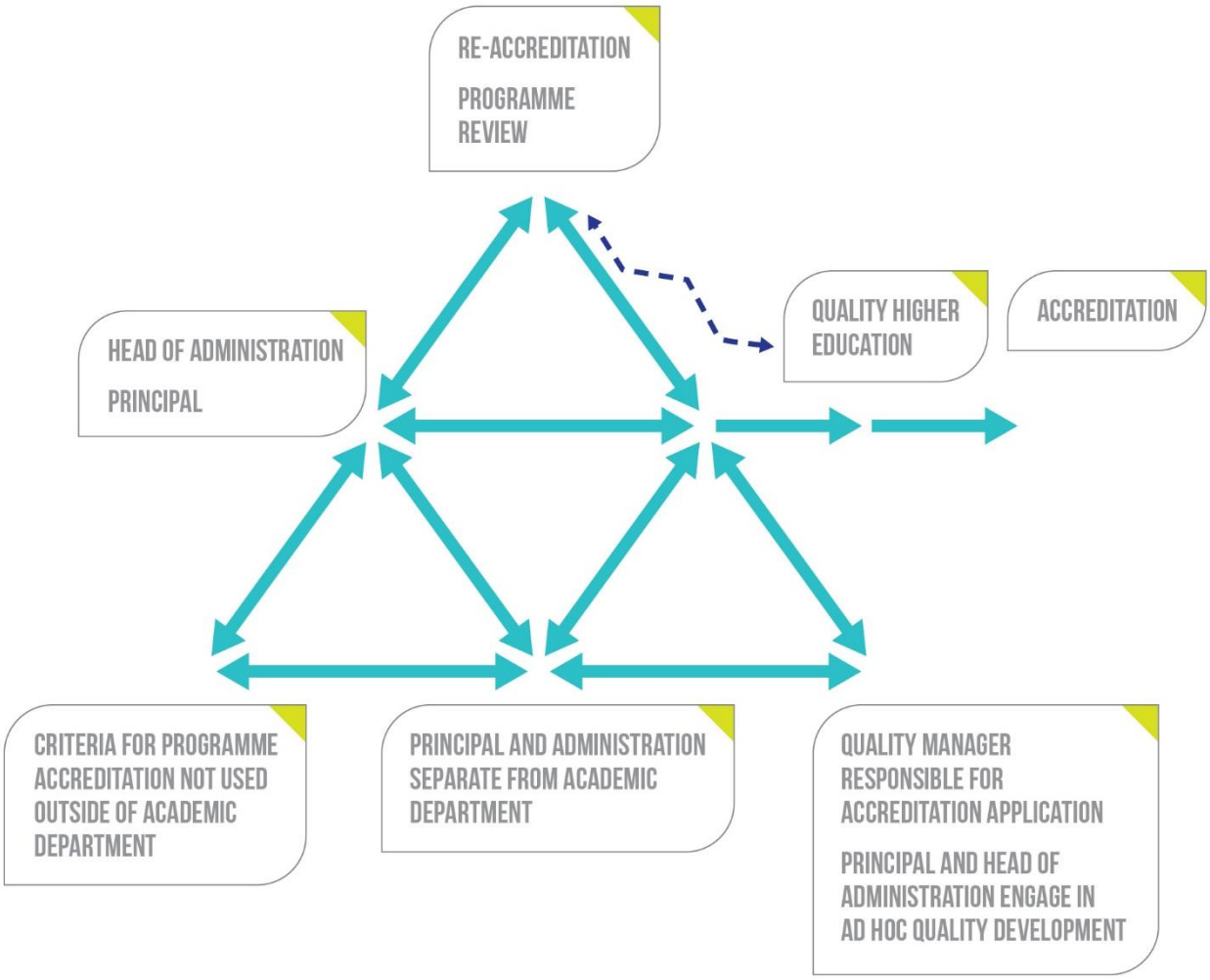

Figure 10: Cultural-historical tensions within the activity system

Although the attitude towards accreditation within the institution has largely shifted and is shaped by the view that it has helped to develop a beneficial QMS, the Principal and Head of Administration see re-accreditation as resting within the academic department (*community*) of which they are not part. In other words, they did not believe that the application for re-accreditation was relevant to the work that they complete outside of the academic department.

4.4.3.1 ANALYSIS OF THE MANAGERS' RESPONSE TO THE CONTRADICTIONS

Although the Principal and Head of Administration experienced the same contradiction, as summarised in Table 3, there were differences in the way they responded. By delegating the responsibility of accreditation to someone else, the Principal was able to continue focusing on enhancing and measuring the quality of the graduate films and the employability of graduates while at the same time ensuring that the business was legal.

In her interview, the Head of Administration shared that she found the review process meaningless and a waste of time; in so doing, she justified the narrowing of her activity and involved herself as little as possible in the re-accreditation process:

> 'I like to just do things. I don't like having to say what I like doing about them ... I do what I need to do to get things done. The reporting on it is painful ... Having to report on how it gets done is just like why worry about that – if it's done, it's done?'

Despite this lack of formal involvement, she continually reviews and improves her own systems, guidelines and ways of doing things, and is always open to discuss and debate how to improve the service that she provides:

> 'We've put systems into place as we've gone along. They've changed, they've grown, or they've gone away completely because they weren't working.'

A review and analysis of interview data and historical documentation reveals that these informal QA activities resulted in fragmentation of the PHEI AS, which heightened over time as the IQA structures and language became progressively more aligned to the EQA landscape. This resulted in an inner tension for the Principal: he valued the IQMS, especially when he saw evidence of how it improved the quality of student work and graduate attributes, and he wanted to contribute, but he felt that he no longer had means to contribute to quality development:

> **Interviewee:** I wish I could contribute more but sometimes I feel like my contribution can actually get people off track, because I'm always like 'Oh what about doing this?' and you're like alright you've got to stay on track here because we've got a system for this, don't just come and get involved here when we have a plan already.
>
> **Interviewer:** No, it's…
>
> **Interviewee:** No, I know that you guys are patient with me.

Table 3: Responding to contradictions when expected to contribute to the re-accreditation process

Actions	**Description of contradictions**	**Activity system tensions**	**Response to contradictions**
Participating in the application for re-accreditation	*Double-bind:* Accreditation is not relevant outside of the academic department	Accreditation is not viewed as a *tool* to develop quality (*object*) outside of the academic department (*community*)	*Principal and Head of Admin - Narrowed:* Did not engage in the application for re-accreditation *Principal and Head of Admin - Disintegration:* Continue to engage in various ad hoc actions aimed at measuring and enhancing quality *Principal - Switched:* Adopted role to champion the need for IQA and the EQA *Quality Manager – Widened* Integrated ad hoc quality initiatives into the IQA

In an attempt to address this fragmentation, the Principal and Head of Administration regularly consult with me on how these ad hoc activities relate to our IQMS. For example, the Head of Administration engaged me in the review of an administration process that was inhibiting the quality of student support; we reviewed the current policy and procedure together and put forward recommendations for relevant amendments. Another example is when I incorporated feedback from the Principal, that he shared with me as a result of reviewing student work or speaking to industry, into the course review meetings. In this way I expanded my activity during the preparation for re-accreditation to incorporate their insights and recommendations.

In addition to continuing to complete ad hoc quality activities, the Principal *switched* his approach to positively endorse my role as Quality Manager, and the work of the CHE. By choosing to champion the accreditation agenda, he encouraged support from other staff members. The Principal's shift enabled him to continue ensuring that the programme remained relevant to industry, while still addressing the CHE requirements and supporting my efforts to implement a rigorous IQA system that served to address his compliance and legal concerns.

4.5 BALANCING THE TENSION BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The fourth and final tension that surfaced from the data was evident throughout the re-accreditation process, but particularly apparent during the final phase of writing up the application and interpreting the outcome of the application.

When compiling the application, I recorded in my journal that my approach was to be as honest and transparent as possible about the issues, and not to try and 'paint a pretty picture'. I wanted to be more critical in my approach when addressing the statements, as I felt that this would highlight the relevant issues rather than glossing over them. In this way I wished to use the opportunity to unpack any issues that may be inhibiting student success. I believed that because the institution was in the second phase of the re-accreditation system there was a little more trust in the quality of education that the institution offered, and therefore I could be more transparent. This was reinforced by the feedback from the CHE in the re-accreditation seminars, where it was repeatedly mentioned that the CHE was taking a more developmental approach.

However, when analysing the CHE professed approach, there were certain inconsistencies within the AS (indicated in Figure 11) which are in contradiction to this '*rule'*. Firstly, 'developmental' implies that the community works together to enhance quality in an iterative process that involves communication between members of the community to develop an improved outcome. However, there is a split within the community involved in the re-accreditation, and a strong division separates the staff of the PHEI and the CHE, despite their intention to support PHEIs. The CHE is unable or unwilling to respond to queries in a way that is helpful and within a useful time period, outside of the planned re-accreditation workshop at the beginning of the re-accreditation process. Furthermore, communication with the evaluators is prohibited and their identities are protected. This does not paint a picture of a community that supports a collaborative approach to developing quality in higher education.

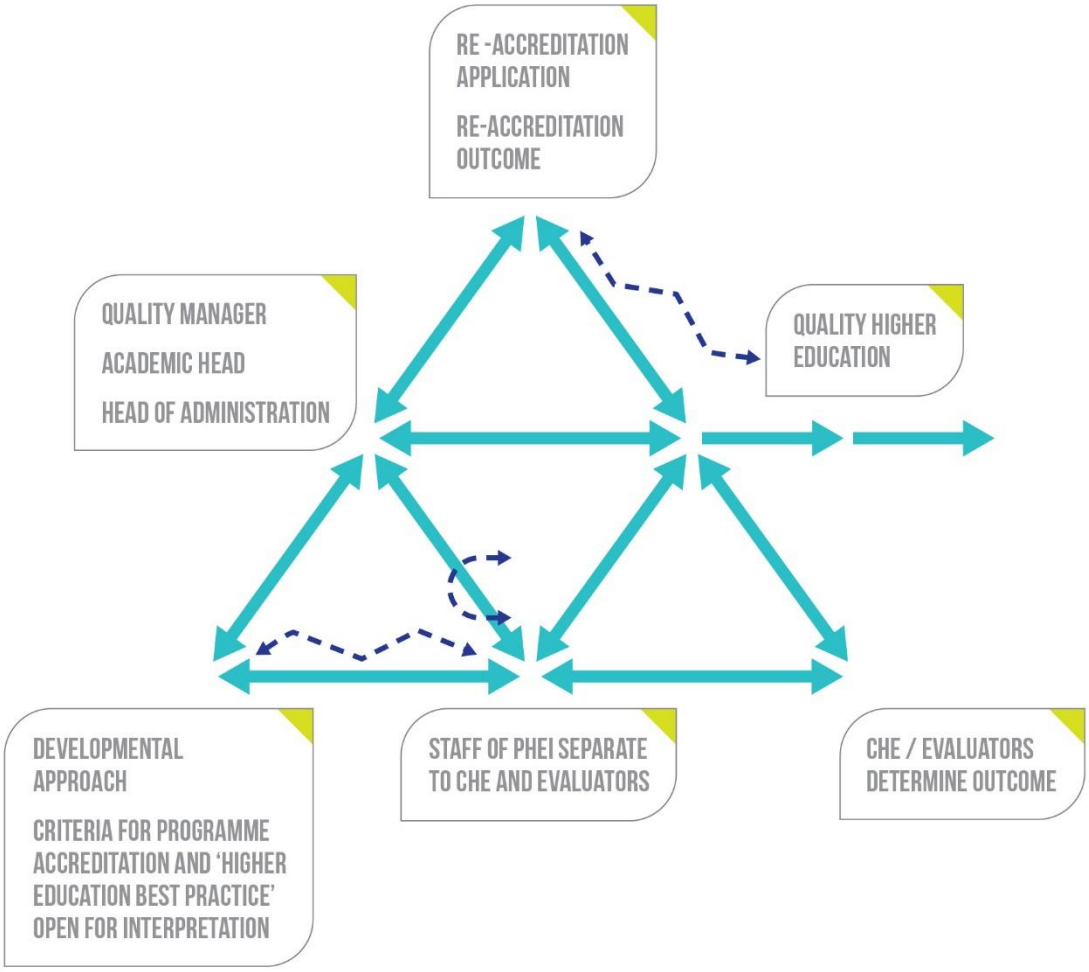

Figure 11: Tensions within the activity system when completing the application for re-accreditation

Secondly, the Criteria for Programme Accreditation – the *rules* that guide the re-accreditation – are broad and open to interpretation, which is especially challenging when one considers that institutions are encouraged to apply 'higher education best practice' when responding to the criteria. This is not bad in itself, but when one takes into account that 1) some interpretations are valued (in the case of the evaluator) while others may not be (in the case of a small private provider), and that 2) there is limited opportunity for debate and discussion, then this lack of clarity due to a power imbalance within the *division of labour* is clearly not aligned to a developmental approach (*rules*). Despite having engaged with the criteria for over a decade, there were instances where I found: 1) the terminology to be ambiguous; 2) the criteria to be vague and open to multiple interpretations; and 3) the criteria to be more relevant to addressing issues that arise in larger public institutions:

> ‘I don’t know when it is fine to swap out concepts or when they mean entirely different things depending in which country or environment you are in. In other words, they could be asking for one thing and we interpret it in a completely different way and thus we provide an answer that is entirely different to what the CHE is looking for. If I was able to talk to someone and ask ‘what is being asked here?’ then I think any misunderstandings could have been addressed quickly and effectively.’ (Journal entry)

The Academic Head also expressed that she did not always know how to respond to the questions, and remembered that at times we struggled through the process:

> ‘… there were a lot of confusing aspects in terms of what exactly are they looking for here, how do we go about interpreting these criteria and all of that kind of stuff’ (Academic Head – interview)

She also highlighted that we did not always know how much evidence was required to support the findings and justify the ratings:

> ‘It’s also not always logical what evidence you're looking for, and what exactly do you put to prove that you're doing this and this and this. Some of [the] things are in place like moderation reports … but then … proving communication? … such as all the slack messages …, and was that even right, haha, I don't know?’ (Academic Head – interview)

In addition to uncertainty about the type and quality of evidence, we discovered that the historical student data that were available for review were incomplete and at times inaccurate, and thus required substantial processing in order to be useful.

Lastly, the outcome of the application for re-accreditation was a single statement: ‘re-accredited (with conditions)’. Two conditions were listed: the first called for information on the professional qualifications of moderators, which was submitted as part of the institutional information, and the second called for evidence to be submitted on an action that I had identified needed to be completed after the re-accreditation process. This response did little as a *mediating artefact* to develop quality within the institution; it did not provide further clarity on the quality of the programme review, the rigour of the IQMS, or the value of the programme review. It did not help to support the development of the quality education (*object*), but instead merely outlined that the application complied with the minimum standards.

4.5.1 Analysis of the Managers' Response to the Contradictions

As summarised in Table 4, the Head of Administration responded to the accountability requirements by redesigning the Student Management System, so that we could pull reports on student data knowing the information were complete and accurate. Thus, the accountability requirements motivated a widening of the activity, and as a result gave access to information that could be used to develop quality.

The Academic Head and I attempted to respond to the issues regarding ambiguity of the criteria by applying our own practical experience, together with doing some research and providing extensive descriptions and definitions in an attempt to clearly communicate our interpretation of the criteria and how we had contextualised this. We also provided extensive evidence to support the application. The Academic Head noted that although the process was time-consuming and we were unsure if it would address the accountability requirements, it yielded insights that addressed our internal quality development concerns:

> '… it was very cumbersome, and it's very hard to get all of that kind of data and information and put it all together specifically for a report. But I think the information that came out of it was very valuable. So, it did identify some areas that were really important, especially for improvements. So, like, processing and monitoring student success; stuff like that that we weren't necessarily doing before. And about identifying the problem and how we go about improving in the future.' (Academic Head – interview)

Not only were the criteria vague, but the CHE has made it quite clear that it is unwilling to give a detailed report on the application for re-accreditation. Hence the managers and I narrowed our activity and experienced a sense of demotivation, as we were left uncertain about the quality of our application for re-accreditation. We did respond to the conditions, but viewed this purely as an accountability requirement which did not help to develop quality. However, the Principal believed that quality within the institution had improved, despite the CHE's lack of formative feedback within the time frame, that is helpful to enhancing quality:

> 'My only criticism of the CHE is that they force these regulations, and then we work night and day [to submit the application], and then we don't get decent feedback in the prescribed time, which is a bit demotivating. But it doesn't affect our business.' (Principal - interview)

Table 4: Responding to tensions during the process of determining the quality of the application for re-accreditation

Actions	**Description of contradictions**	**Activity system tensions**	**Response to contradictions**
Determining the quality of the application for re-accreditation	*Double-bind:* The CHE promotes a developmental approach to re-accreditation, and yet adopts an accountability model	Interaction between staff of PHEI and the CHE/evaluators is limited (*community*). The CHE determines 'correct' interpretation of ambiguous criteria (*division of labour* and *rules).* The re-accreditation outcome *(tools)* does not promote development	*Widened: N*ew data management system improved accuracy and completeness of data used for development *Innovation attempt:* Provided definitions of our interpretation of what was asked and hoped that we interpreted it in a way that was justifiable *Innovation attempt:* Critically reflected on criteria, used applied knowledge, and provided additional evidence to be on the safe side *Narrowed: R*esponded to the outcome as a formality

5 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study was to provide an in-depth understanding of how management of a PHEI interpreted and participated in an application for re-accreditation submitted to the CHE. The research unpacked how quality, QA and accreditation were understood, and how this influenced the extent and way in which management participated in the application for re-accreditation process. Emphasis was placed on illuminating the elements that promote or inhibit quality, as well as the tensions and contradictions that arose within this process.

In the first Chapter I provided a brief history and overview of the QA of private higher education in South Africa and recent changes that motivated this study. In Chapter 2 I discussed the conceptual framework that informed the study, exploring the concepts of quality, QA and accreditation together with the theoretical lens applied to the research (CHAT), which was complemented by a discussion of illuminative evaluation, which I positioned as a suitable theory that informed the research methodology. The research design and methodology were presented in detail in Chapter 3, and I presented my research findings in Chapter 4.

The purpose of this final chapter is to present conclusions regarding the research objectives, namely how management understood re-accreditation; how management participated in the application for re-accreditation; the tensions and contradictions that arose within the activity of applying for re-accreditation; and the elements of the re-accreditation process that promoted or inhibited quality. Recommendations emerging from the study are presented for the consideration of HEIs as well as the CHE, and recommendations for further study are also put forward.

5.1 CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

5.1.1 CONCLUSION 1: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SHAPING THE RESPONSE TO ACCREDITATION

The managers that viewed re-accreditation as a tool to not only account for quality, but also to develop quality, were more inclined to engage with the process. The academic department was headed up by the quality manager and the academic head who perceived accreditation as an opportunity to develop quality as well as account for it, embraced re-accreditation by attempting to use the criteria for programme accreditation to engage with academic staff to identify areas of strength and weakness as well as draw up a quality improvement plan. On the other hand, the Head of Administration, adopted a

compliance approach to the re-accreditation process and completed the required tasks to support the Quality Manager.

The Principal's views of accreditation as a mechanism for accountability were changed through his experience of the implementation and impact of the IQMS that focused on quality development, and he valued the role that it played in enhancing the quality of the programme. Through this process he was able to shift his approach to accreditation, and he helped to create a culture that positively supported the implementation of an integrated QA system.

Engagement with the application for re-accreditation has changed the way in which the Academic Head thinks about the IQA system within the institution and has helped her to understand the field of education better. The Academic Head's opportunity to observe the re-accreditation process in action while I mentored her enabled her to expand her activity and develop a holistic understanding of IQA in relation to EQA. She found that the re-accreditation process supported her quality development agenda. She was able to put forward recommendations for the ongoing development of the IQA, in order to make it more beneficial for all staff involved, as well as to be better prepared for the reporting requirements for the next accreditation cycle.

5.1.2 Conclusion 2: The Impact of Re-accreditation on IQA

The CHE defined the Criteria for Programme Accreditation and created a detailed application for re-accreditation template. The institution chose to use these tools to reflect on their own practice, not only to demonstrate that they meet the minimum criteria, but to look at how to gain value from the process in terms of improving quality. Although the application for re-accreditation was time-consuming and laborious, the design of the form encouraged us to interrogate our practice and direct attention towards issues relating to quality, teaching, learning and assessment as well as student success. It helped to identify important questions that may not necessarily previously have been considered. A five-year quality improvement plan was developed as a result.

5.1.3 Conclusion 3: Knowledge and Knowledgeable Others

It was evident that a lack of knowledge of QA, the Criteria for Programme Accreditation and higher education best practice constrained engagement in the critical review of the programme. This was further exacerbated by an absence of knowledgeable others, particularly those who had the authority to

determine the accreditation outcome. This perceived lack of knowledge resulted in uncertainty, and at times fear, and limited the opportunities for discussion, debate and the further development of quality. Interventions such as CHE forums and learning circles offered limited access to knowledge, but were often pitched inappropriately for the level of understanding that was required.

5.1.4 Conclusion 4: Theoretical and Interpretive Framework

The study has contributed to research on CHAT by applying it to the field of private higher education, and found it to be a useful interpretive framework for providing a deeper understanding of management's conceptions of quality and QA, illuminating their engagement in the socially situated and culturally mediated re-accreditation process stipulated by the CHE.

CHAT was applied to effectively surface tensions and contradictions within a complex activity that transforms over time, and provided an expanded understanding of the cultural-historical aspects that influenced how management responded and adapted by surfacing moments when learning and change occurred. It also helped to identify constraints that inhibited the managers' attempts to engage meaningfully with the re-accreditation process and achieve quality in higher education.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE STUDY

5.2.1 Recommendation 1: Integrate EQA and IQA

Although much has been done to align the IQA with the current EQA, further work could be completed to create opportunities to integrate IQA and programme review into the day-to-day activities of the institution, with particular emphasis on departments outside of the academic department. Existing structures such as meetings, performance appraisals, performance plans and data collection, interpretation and dissemination could be better utilised as vehicles for including opportunities for reflecting on practice and developing quality.

Spaces that encourage creative problem solving and valuing of the voices of all participants would be helpful to address issues that are directly relevant to each individual. These should form part of the day-to-day QA activities, and should be facilitated by a knowledgeable other who can help to build an improved understanding of higher education best practice.

5.2.2 Recommendation 2: Develop Knowledge of Higher Education Best Practice

The impact of the re-accreditation process on developing a robust IQMS and internal programme review could be enhanced through implementation of the following mechanism to develop knowledge of higher education best practice:

- Workshops pitched at quality managers with different levels of knowledge and experience in QA.
- Training for quality managers in the field of higher education. Qualifications in higher education are largely directed at research and there are limited relevant qualifications or short courses that support the development of knowledge and skills in the area of QA.
- The CHE is the gatekeeper to what is considered best practice and it is therefore critical that they engage in communities of practice together with private and public HEIs.

5.2.3 Recommendation 3: Improve Communication Between PHEIs and the CHE

In order for the CHE to take a truly developmental approach to quality in PHEIs, they need to engage more with PHEIs and be more accessible. Alternatively, they need to differentiate between their accountability role and development role, and make another private/public body responsible for the developmental aspects of higher education. Either way, the current model – prescribing of quality criteria, holding a forum on re-accreditation and issuing an accreditation outcome – does not support a developmental approach. At least the following interventions should be put in place in order to increase capacity in areas of QA:

- Provide opportunities to engage with the CHE *during* the process of completing the application for re-accreditation. Such opportunities should take into consideration the maturity of the relevant IQMS and the experience of the quality manager.
- Provide detailed feedback on the quality of the IQMS and programme review, in order to promote an understanding of any issues that may have been identified or areas of best practice that have been applied.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Based on the findings of this study, I would recommend that research be conducted on a broader scale to gain a general understanding of how PHEIs engage with accreditation and re-accreditation. I would also suggest that further research be undertaken in the following areas:

- The impact of accreditation and re-accreditation on academic staff as well as on students, as these are important perspectives to consider when attempting to understand accreditation as a tool to develop the quality of teaching and learning and student success.
- The conceptualisation and use of programme review as a model to address quality development within private higher education; this would help to develop a shared understanding of the types and models of programme review applied by PHEIs, and the extent to which they are effective in developing quality.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM PRESENTED TO PARTICIPANTS

TITLE OF STUDY

An activity theory analysis of how management of a PHEI interpret and engage with re-accreditation

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

Before you decide to participate in this study, please read the following information carefully and ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The aim of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of how a single private provider conducts and reports on an internal programme review which forms part of the recently revised re-accreditation framework set out by the Council on Higher Education. The accreditation framework aims to promote an integrated approach to accreditation and increased autonomy for higher education institutions with regard to the re-accreditation of programmes. The research unpacks how internal programme review is understood and applied within the context of the institution, placing emphasis on understanding the elements that promote or inhibit quality as well as the tensions and contradictions that arise within and between the internal and external quality assurance policies and processes.

The driving question addressed by this research was: How does management within a South African private higher education institution engage with the re-accreditation process?

The following guiding questions will shape the study:

1. How is internal programme review understood within the institution?

2. How is an internal programme review conducted within the institution?
3. What tensions and contradictions arise within the internal programme review process?
4. What elements of the internal programme review process promote or inhibit quality?

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data will be collected from participants using the following methods.

1. Document Analyses: The following documents will be analysed:

- The strategic plan which includes the vision, mission and objectives of the institution.
- The Quality Management System Policy of the Institution
- The Institution Self-Evaluation report, inclusive of all relevant annexures.
- Minutes of all meetings pertaining to the Institutional Self-Evaluation.

2. **Participant Observation:** The researcher will participate in the daily activities of the institution and requests permission to make notes of observations made, as well as to take digital recordings of meetings that relate to the institutional self-evaluation and application for re-accreditation which will be submitted to CHE. Comments made by participants who do not wish to participate will be deleted from the relevant fieldnotes and transcripts.

3. **Individual interviews:** Managers will be invited to attend an hour-long interview at a date and time that is convenient for the participant, with the option of up to two follow-up interviews. Open-ended questions will be used to explore the participant's experience of the re-accreditation process with specific focus on understanding the extent that it has assisted them to enhance and/or inhibit quality of education at the institution. Interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recording device.

BENEFITS

The findings of this study could be used to develop institutional policy as well as increase the validity, meaningfulness and impact of future evaluations. Insights gained through this study may also be used by other private higher education institutions to highlight possible issues that may arise when designing and conducting programme evaluations. Should the findings of this study be highly revealing, then they may be used to motivate related studies which could in turn be used to inform national policy.

CONFIDENTIALITY

For the purposes of this research study, your comments will remain anonymous and every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality, including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in the password-protected personal computer belonging to the primary researcher.

Participant data will be kept confidential at all times.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Researcher, please contact the following person:

Robyn Udemans
Research Faculty
University of Cape Town
Tel: 021 650 2776
Email: Robyn.Udemans@uct.ac.za

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read, and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask

questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Please select one:

- ☐ I am willing to participate in an interview at a date and time that is convenient to me.
- ☐ I am not willing to participate in an interview.

Participant's name _____

Participant's signature _____

Date _____

Researcher's name _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date _____

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Research title	An activity theory analysis of how management of a private higher education institution interpret and engage with re-accreditation
Research question	How does a South African private higher education institution engage with an internal programme review conducted for external quality assurance?
Research sub-questions	1. How is internal programme review understood within the institution? 2. How is an internal programme review conducted within the institution? 3. What tensions and contradictions arise within the internal programme review process? 4. What elements of the internal programme review process promote or inhibit quality?
Date	
Time and duration	
Institution	
Location	
Participant (P)	
Interviewer (I)	Rhiannon Reid

1. How is internal programme review understood within the institution?

Framework for Question	**Question**
Thesis question	How is internal programme review understood within the institution?
Core question informed by thesis question	How do you understand the purpose and value of the internal programme review process?
Supplementary questions informed by CHAT	
Subject	What purpose does it serve for you? Is there any value for you?

	Do you feel it is necessary? How could the process become more valuable? What did you want to achieve out of the process?
Object	What purpose does it serve for the school? What value do you think it brings to the school, the staff, the industry? What value do you think it brings to improving learning/student success? What value do you think it brings to achieving our vision/mission?
Tools	What was your experience of the template for the programme accreditation? What was your experience of the questions contained in the programme review template? What was your experience of the criteria for programme accreditation?
Rules/Norms/ Conventions	To what extend do the internal rules / expectations / guidelines promote an understanding of programme review? To what extend do the external rules / expectations / guidelines promote an understanding of programme review?
Community	What was your experience of the academic/admin staff response to the programme review? Did you engage the students, parents, industry, external academics? What knowledge/skills/experience do the various role players have in programme review?
Division of labour	Who decided to run the programme review? Who benefits from the programme review? Who designed the programme review?

2. How is an internal programme review conducted within the institution?

Framework for Question	**Question**
Thesis question	How is an internal programme review conducted within the institution?
Core question informed by thesis question	How was the internal programme review conducted?
Supplementary questions informed by CHAT	
Subject	How were you involved in the programme review?
Object	What was the outcome of the programme review?
Tools	How was the re-accreditation form used?
Rules/Norms/ Conventions	How were the Criteria for Programme Accreditation used? How helpful was the internal policy quality assurance on programme review? How clear are the internal rules / expectations around programme review? How clear are the external rules / expectations around programme review?
Community	Who was involved in the programme review process? How were they involved?
Division of labour	Who decided how the review would be conducted? How were responsibilities delegated?

3. What tensions and contradictions arise within the internal programme review process?

Framework for Question	Question
Thesis question	What tensions and contradictions arise within the internal programme review process?
Core question informed by thesis question	The CHE's aim is to improve quality by mandating that all PHEIs conduct the programme review / application for re-accreditation. In your experience, were there elements / processes / structures that were in contradiction to this objective?
Supplementary questions informed by CHAT	
Subject	Did you experience a difference between what you value as quality, what the institution values and what the external quality assurer values? What aspects of the programme review process did you find challenging?
Object	Were there clashes between internal quality assurance objectives and the CHE's programme review process?
Tools	Were there aspects of the re-accreditation form that were in contradiction to the aim of improving quality? Was the form confusing/ contradictory in any way?
Rules/Norms/ Conventions	How aligned was the programme review process with the internal policies and procedures on quality assurance? How did the programme review process 'fit' with the standard quality assurance activities of the school?
Community	Were there conflicts between roles in the attempt to achieve quality?
Division of labour	The CHE stated that institutions should take more ownership of the programme review process. Did you feel that this was achieved? Please explain.

4. What elements of the internal programme review process promote or inhibit quality?

Framework for Question	Question
Thesis question	What elements of the internal programme review process promote or inhibit quality?
Core question informed by thesis question	What elements of the internal programme review process promote quality within the institution? What elements of the internal programme review process inhibit quality within the institution?
Supplementary questions informed by CHAT	
Subject	What is your experience in programme review and quality assurance?
Object	In your opinion, as a whole, did the quality improvement process help or inhibit the achievement of quality? What elements inhibited your involvement in the institutional self-evaluation? What elements promoted your involvement in the institutional self-evaluation?
Tools	Did the self-evaluation report provide any insights that you found useful and/or will you be using these to inform your decisions/actions going forward? If so, please describe. What aspects of the re-accreditation form inhibited the programme review process and/or the promotion of quality?
Rules/Norms/ Conventions	Did the Criteria for Programme Accreditation help to promote or inhibit the programme review process? Did internal policy/ procedures / guidelines help to promote / inhibit the programme review process?
Community	What elements (experience / knowledge / engagement / time / attitude etc.) of the stakeholders promoted / inhibited quality?

Division of labour	What elements of the external quality assurer promote / inhibit quality? What elements of the internal roles and responsibilities of the programme review team promote / inhibit quality?

5. **With regard to the study, is there anything else that you wish to mention?**

APPENDIX C. INTRODUCTION TO THE 2018 RE-ACCREDITATION SUBMISSION TEMPLATE

As stated in the re-accreditation letter of 23 February 2018 titled *2018 Re-Accreditation Process*, the 2018 re-accreditation submission focuses on the following areas aligned to the Criteria for Programme Accreditation (2004):

i. Conditions from the previous re-accreditation cycle

ii. Programme design

iii. Teaching and learning interactions

iv. Assessment practices

v. Academic development including student support

vi. Infrastructure

vii. Student and retention throughput rates

viii. Programme coordination and programme review

The template is structured into eight sections corresponding to the eight areas. The first section focuses on conditions/recommendations set by the HEQC to improve the quality of programmes from previous applications for re-accreditation. In this section the institution is to outline the quality improvements affected that address the issues raised by the HEQC previously and provide details of the institutional plans to address outstanding recommendations that have not yet been addressed.

The remaining seven sections are divided into two parts. The first part contains statements related to the focus area. The institution is to interrogate each statement, consider all relevant data available to it and in relation to each statement rate whether its programme:

- exceeds minimum standards
- meets minimum standards
- partially meets minimum standards, but with improvement needed
- partially meets minimum standards, but with significant improvement needed
- does not meet the majority of the minimum standards

It is then to justify its rating in a concise, analytical and reflective summary in relation to minimum requirements. Minimum requirements should include the *Criteria for Programme Accreditation (2004)*, *the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (2013)*, *Policies on the Recognition of Prior Learning, Credit Accumulation and Transfer, and Assessment in higher education (2016)*, *Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework (2012)* and good higher education practice. If the programme needs improvement in any area, the summary should clearly indicate what actionable improvements will be taken by the institution within specified timeframes to ensure that the programme meets minimum requirements.

The second part of each section requires the institution to respond to each statement by reflecting on all of its responses in its submission and then provide a concise narrative that demonstrates an integrated and robust analysis on the management of the quality of its programmes at a programme level and where useful an institutional level.

The CHE requests authentic responses to each section.

APPENDIX D. INTERPRETATION OF ACTIVITY SYSTEM NODES AND TERMS USED IN THIS STUDY

Term/ Node	Definition	Example in the study	Key Questions
Subject	Individual or group	Member of management in a particular role	Who is the subject, what is their history, what are their values, what are the stories they tell about themselves?
Tools	Conceptual and theoretical tools, knowledge and understanding, knowledgeable others, instruments and physical tools used as mediation of knowledge interaction (signs/ artefacts)	Knowledge of best practice in higher education; experience in quality assurance; mentors; Self-evaluation report (SER)	What knowledge, tools or knowledgeable others (experts) does the subject lack/need/use to understand and engage with the object?
Object	The shared object, space or material at which the activity is directed	Quality higher education	What is the subject directing their activity towards?
Rules	Explicit and implicit procedures, norms and conventions which make the members behave in a particular way	Criteria for programme accreditation; institutional policies and procedures; higher education legislation; social norms and ways of doing things; the institution's re-accreditation project plan; re-accreditation expectations (approach, intended outcomes, etc.) communicated by the CHE to PHEIs; attitudes and values which shape	What (formal or informal) rules, structures or ways of doing things enable or constrain the subject's ability to engage with the object?

		participation in and understanding of re-accreditation	
Community	The social structure within which activity takes place made up of members with a shared object	Culture; extent of collaboration; extent of participation; the institution's stakeholders; peers within higher education; the CHE and DHET	How does the extent, nature and culture of the community support or inhibit the subject's engagement with the object?
Division of Labour	Power and status of individuals within the community. Distribution of tasks and responsibilities	Formal vs informal position; responsibilities vs decision making power; perceived or stated vs actual authority	How does structure and power promote or constrain the subject's engagement with the object?
Outcome	The intended or unintended outcome of the activity	Accountability: Re-accreditation Development: Improvement in quality of education	What is the value and impact of the outcome of the activity for the subject?
Contradictions	Conflicts, tensions, contradictions and interruptions in the mediations. Can take place within a node, between nodes or between nodes within separate ASs	Conflicts, disruptions, tensions in the mediations within and between the nodes that may inhibit the achievement of the management's and/or CHE's intended outcome or may transform the activity	What current and/or historical contradictions are there within a node? What current and/or historical contradictions are there between nodes? What current and/or historical contradictions are there between ASs?

APPENDIX E. ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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26 August 2017

Ms Rhiannon Sara Reid (RDXRHI001)
M.Ed Programme
UCT

Dear Ms Reid,

RE: Ethical Clearance for Student Research Project

I can confirm that ethical clearance is granted by the School of Education Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your Masters research project entitled: 'A case study of programme self-evaluation in a private higher education institution: Illuminating the relationship between internal quality assurance and external compliance requirements'.
I wish you all the best with your study.

Yours sincerely,

Signature Removed

Associate Professor Carolyn McKinney
Chair, School of Education Research Ethics Committee